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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
EVELYN WAUGH'S ABSURD VISION

by



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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Evelyn Waugh's first five novels are comic and entertaining but they reveal an underlying serious purpose. In these early works Waugh presents a vision of the modern waste land in which man can find no meaning or purpose. To a large extent this vision is a comic expression of the same perception of contemporary existence as that postulated by the "absurdist" philosophers, playwrights and writers. Using Albert Camus' representative study of the absurd sensitivity in The Myth of Sisyphus as the main frame of reference, this thesis attempts to demonstrate that the subject-matter and technique of Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, Black Mischief, A Handful of Dust and Scoop co-operate to express Waugh's absurd vision.

Waugh uses the sudden accident and the coincidence to illustrate the dominance of chance and the absence of a principle of order in life. This suggestion that the universe is irrational is elaborated by the author's portrayal of the indifference of creation to the individual's suffering. His characters experience both the primitive hostility of nature, which thwarts any attempts at reason and order, and the alienating indifference of society.

The confrontation of incongruous elements, of man's reason with the irrational universe, of man's intentions and

the reality of his environment, or of man's awareness and the awareness of others, gives rise to the feeling of the absurd. Waugh conveys the sense of disintegration in this century through the juxtapositioning of incongruities. He portrays the incompatibility between his characters' awareness and the environment in which they live and between the awareness of characters shaped by one environment and those shaped by another. In Vile Bodies modern technology is shown to be instrumental in creating the multiple perceptions of reality which by their incongruity introduce a sense of absurdity.

Waugh borrows several techniques from film and art. For example, he employs the technique of "montage" to suggest the absence of a principle of order in life and to counterpoint incongruous events and ideas. He also explores the role of language in creating and revealing contradictory perceptions of reality. At times he introduces structural patterns and images to express or symbolize the nature of life in the twentieth century. His method of characterization and use of the anti-hero, too, are consistent with his underlying vision.

Waugh's Catholicism is not apparent in these early novels; it remains a private system of values which he does not attempt to offer as a standard or solution. Nor does any other system of values act as a standard for his satire. There is, however, no doubt that these early novels are satires. They are satires in which the author applies his rational faculties to a perception of man and the world as they are, and, because he encounters an irrational universe, is unable to assert a moral vision of what ought to be.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the criticisms most frequently leveled at Evelyn Waugh is that his earlier works lack a serious purpose. Steven Marcus calls Waugh "an entertainer" and defines an entertainer as "a writer who does not press upon us the full complexities of life, who does not demand from us total seriousness in making moral judgements."¹ Joan Griffiths attacks Waugh for lacking a "moral core."² A. E. Dyson claims he has no "moral seriousness."³ Over and over again critics charge that Waugh's novels prior to Brideshead Revisited are frivolous.

Whatever the validity of "moral seriousness" as a criterion for judging the quality of a literary work, this charge which critics make against Waugh is specious, although it is not difficult to recognize those characteristics of the early novels which give rise to it. The most important of these characteristics are: the narrow segment of society which the novels present; their comic, light-hearted and apparently superficial tone, even when tragic events are described; Waugh's method of characterization, which usually avoids subjective analysis and contributes to the light-hearted, detached tone; the trivial nature of the actions which his characters are often engaged in; the absence of any explicit consideration

of "serious" ideas; and, finally, the lack of any easily-discerned moral viewpoint. The serious purpose which becomes obvious in Brideshead Revisited is not, however, absent from the novels which come before it. Don W. Kleine has called these novels "burlesque versions of our century's most overwhelming question,"⁴ and in fact, the formative principle of these early works is Waugh's vision of the modern world as a waste land, his awareness of the spiritual malaise of the age.

It is irrelevant that the novels deal with a narrow segment of society: with the upper-middle class or upper-class, the world of Society and the Smart Set of the inter-war period. Waugh writes about the people he knows best, but they and their world are not just presented and satirized for themselves; they are representatives of the entire modern age. Because of their wealth and positions the variety of experiences available to them makes them more representative of the twentieth century than any other part of society. Moreover, the world of Waugh's novels resembles but does not duplicate the existing world. There are fantastical elements in most of the novels which discourage us from simply regarding the novels as realistic descriptions of historical particulars and invite us to see them as visions which convey the truth about modern life.

The vision of twentieth century life which organizes

Waugh's first five⁵ novels has an affinity with the attitude of the philosophers, playwrights and other writers who have been associated with the tradition of the absurd. Waugh does not express his ideas in philosophical terms, but he translates into his fiction the feeling of a world gone mad, of a world without meaning or purpose, which Camus and others have written about. Of course, any attempt to link Waugh with such thinkers as Camus, Sartre, or the absurdist dramatists is only useful as a means of understanding the author's work as it reflects the dominant spirit of his age and expresses an intuition of modern life which has now become formalized and labeled "absurdist"; Waugh has no direct affinities with the so-called absurdist, and his non-fictional writings reflect none of their ideas. Waugh has been called a reactionary, his works reveal a nostalgia for the past, and yet his early satires reflect the same intuition or insight into modern life that many of the most progressive writers of the century have had. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate what the nature of this insight is and how it is expressed in Waugh's first five novels, Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, Black Mischief, A Handful of Dust and Scoop.

CHAPTER I

THE ABSURD

Albert Camus provides a useful analysis of the spiritual dilemma of the twentieth century in his essay The Myth of Sisyphus. His study of the "absurd sensitivity," as he calls it, will be the frame of reference for my examination of the absurd sensitivity in Waugh's novels.

Camus writes:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.¹

The beliefs and values of previous centuries which provided man with certitude have been discredited by their failure in practice and by science. Man no longer sees or feels himself part of a universal order of things. The illusion, created by various religions and philosophical systems, that he has a definite place and role in a rational universe has vanished and man is left with a sense of the purposelessness of his existence in an irrational universe. "This world in itself," Camus writes, "is not reasonable,

that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."² The absurd arises out of the confrontation and contradiction between man's expectations, based on his need for happiness and reason, and the unreasonable silence of the universe which he encounters. The confrontation of man's reason with the irrationality of the world alienates him from it and makes him a stranger:

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world, I should be this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation.³

Primitive man belongs to the irrational world, like the tree or the cat. It is only civilized man with his insistence on understanding and on finding meaning who feels estranged from "all creation" and experiences this feeling of the absurd.

The absurd is essentially a feeling born of incongruity:

"It's absurd" means "It's impossible" but also "It's contradictory." If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view. . . . I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and

the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.⁴

The feeling of the absurd arises when man is faced with incongruity. The incompatibility between a man's intentions and the environment in which he finds himself, between his ideas and the reality which contradicts them, is just one of the many absurdities we encounter in life which are aspects of the absurd. These absurdities or contradictions have increased considerably in an era characterized by multiplication of experience. Although many systems of meaning and value still find followers, there is no general accepted world view and the simultaneous existence of many contradictory and irreconcilable attitudes and beliefs is largely responsible for the sense of disintegration and absurdity which plagues modern man.

Martin Esslin explains in his book The Theatre of the Absurd:

The madness of the times lies precisely in the existence, side by side, of a large number of unreconciled beliefs and attitudes--conventional morality, for example, on the one hand, and the values of advertising on the other; the conflicting claims of science and religion; or the loudly proclaimed striving of all sections for the general interest when in fact each is pursuing very narrow and selfish particular ends. On each page of his newspaper, the man in the street is confronted with a different and contradictory pattern of values.⁵

The newspaper, the radio, the film, the car, the plane and other media have both facilitated the dissemination of so many conflicting beliefs and attitudes and provided new and sometimes antithetical perceptions of reality. To look

at a city from a plane, to observe the country-side from a speeding train or car, or to see a photograph of a familiar object, changes our awareness of them. The resulting incongruity between one awareness and another is also a source of contemporary man's absurd view of life.

Waugh presents no arguments for an absurd view of the world; his vision of the modern world as absurd must be inferred from the nature of the characters, actions and environment in the novels. These, together with certain techniques and images, convey the underlying sense of the meaninglessness and chaos of life in this century which characterizes the first five novels.

CHAPTER II

THE IRRATIONAL UNIVERSE

"This world in itself is not reasonable,
that is all that can be said."

Waugh's vision of an unreasonable universe, irresponsive to man's need for order and meaning, pervades all of the early novels. Many aspects of both form and content in the novels suggest this irrationality, but some characteristics suggest it more specifically than others. The sudden accident and the coincidence play a large part in Waugh's fiction for example.

Sudden accidents and coincidences illustrate the arbitrariness of all events in life, the dominance of chance and the absence of a principle of order. Actions have remote, unlikely relationships to consequences. In Decline and Fall Paul is expelled from university and finds himself penniless because he crosses the path of the Bollinger Club while wearing a tie which bears a marked resemblance to the one worn by members of the club. This is the first of several chance occurrences which radically alter Paul's life. Malcolm Bradbury points out that the recurrence of the toast drunk to fortune in the novel emphasizes how chance is at the heart of Waugh's novels.¹

Adam Symes breaks off his engagement to Nina Blount many times because chance incidents are constantly depriving him of the necessary money. A malicious Customs official burns the autobiography he is contracted to write for a good price. He loses his job as a gossip columnist when Nina substitutes for him and chooses the very topics his boss has forbidden. He wins a thousand pounds and loses it immediately because he is drunk. In Scoop William Boot is precipitated into a lucrative job as a star reporter because he is mistaken for someone else and succeeds through luck despite his ignorance. Much of the action of the novels resembles a pinball machine; the characters are like pinballs, arbitrarily knocked about from incident to incident.

Though in the other novels the treatment of this theme of chance in life and the irrationality of the universe is primarily comic, in A Handful of Dust it becomes serious and ironic. Chance plays a major role in the novel as one coincidence after another leads first to John Andrew's death and then to Tony's virtual interment in the jungles of South America. The arbitrariness of both these events is deliberately emphasized in the description of the events leading up to them. The coincidental and dramatically ironic phrases which are uttered before John's accident--"I hope he doesn't break his neck,"² "If I'm in at the death,"³ "But there mayn't

be another day,"⁴ "You won't see any death,"⁵--accentuate the pervading sense of chance which surrounds the death. The failure to find a fox in the first covert leads to one turning point where, for a moment, it hangs in the balance whether John will stay or go home: "So John's fate was decided"; Waugh writes ironically, "hounds went in one direction, he and Ben in another."⁶ At the time we do not recognize the full significance of the statement. As John and Ben are riding home, a chance occurrence, the sudden backfiring of a motorcycle, combines with a nervous horse to bring about the accident. Waugh underlines the chance nature of the occurrence when he writes: "Everyone agreed that it was nobody's fault."⁷ Tony's fate, too, is an example of the irrationality of the universe. Chance characterizes the incidents which lead to Tony's imprisonment at Mr. Todd's: the Indians' superstitious reaction to the mechanical mice, itself a manifestation of the irrational, and Dr. Messinger's accidental drowning, which leaves Tony, alone and helpless, to wander onto Mr. Todd's plantation. In describing the latter event Waugh ironically and significantly uses the phrase: "by good chance."

The coincidences and improbabilities contribute to the sense of unreality, even fantasy, frequently conveyed in the novels. As I have already suggested, the world we are presented with in these works is not, strictly speaking, completely realistic. The sometimes improbable incidents,

the unnaturally rapid action and shifts in fortune of characters such as Paul and Adam, and the highly coincidental encounters, prevent us from regarding the world of the novels as an accurate copy of the actual world, although we recognize the essential truth of the portrait. The rapid shifts in Paul Pennyfeather's fortune which take place after he is stripped of his trousers, especially his fairy-tale escape from prison;⁸ the reappearance of Dr. Fagan, Philbrick, Prendergast and Grimes in various roles throughout Decline and Fall; Adam's constant encounters with the drunk Major wherever he goes, culminated by the most improbable meeting with Chastity and the Major on the vast battlefield of an imaginary war; Basil's unwitting consumption of his own girlfriend; Mr. Baldwin's convenient appearance "out of the blue;" and perhaps also Tony's fate in the jungle are either too fantastic or coincidental to be taken as accurate representations of reality. On the other hand, it is interesting that some of the most bizarre occurrences in the novels, for example the boot-eating incident in Black Mischief, really did happen. Paul Doyle correctly points out that "similar and even more outlandish events are reported in the daily press."⁹ It is the frequency with which these outlandish events and coincidences take place that makes reality exaggerated in a novel such as Decline and Fall. But the essential truth which they suggest--the irrationality of the world--is obvious.

CHAPTER III

THE INDIFFERENT UNIVERSE

"The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millenia."

Camus emphasizes the alienation which civilized man feels in the face of an unreasonable and silent universe. To say that the world is irrational is to imply that it is indifferent and alien:

A step lower and the strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. . . . The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millenia. . . . Just one thing: that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd.¹

Because civilized man's reason sets him "in opposition to all creation," the world seems hostile and indifferent, "cruel" as it were. Other men are a part of this hostile and indifferent world: "Men, too secrete the inhuman,"² Camus has written. Waugh's awareness of this universal cruelty, as manifested in his portrayal of the indifference of both man and nature to the plight and suffering of the individual human being has led critics to charge him with indulging in gratuitous cruelty in his novels. What he has tried to do, however, is to suggest the arbitrariness, indifference and hostility which Camus describes; the most

memorable examples of it are Lord Tangent's death, Agatha Runcible's death and Basil Seal's inadvertent consumption of Prudence.

James Carens points out that Waugh borrows Firbank's technique of introducing an "inconsequential chain of events" which is briefly and almost imperceptibly referred to in the midst of other matters.³ Waugh makes the technique more pointed by taking a trivial event which is casually mentioned and making it the cause of a series of events which acquire more and more gravity, but which are still treated as trivial and still casually and briefly referred to. In these instances Waugh presents a sequence of events in a cause to effect relationship, but does not use it to create the impression of order. The technique becomes a means of conveying the blind and irrational relationship of cause to effect in a universe without purpose or meaning which disposes of man as it pleases. By treating these disturbing incidents in a detached and indifferent manner, Waugh emphasizes the arbitrariness, cruelty and absurdity of the world. By treating incidents which we feel should be important, and therefore highlighted, as insignificant, Waugh conveys a sense of the indifference of the world. This too is part of the feeling of the absurd.

The first example of this technique occurs in Decline and Fall. Little Lord Tangent is shot in the foot

by Mr. Prendergast, who is acting as the starter for a race. "'That won't hurt him,' said Lady Circumference, 'but I think someone ought to remove the pistol from that old man before he does anything serious.'"⁴ Nothing more is said until almost thirty pages later we learn through a casual conversation between Paul and Peter Beste-Chetwynde that Lady Circumference's comment was a bit optimistic: "'Tangent's foot has swollen up and turned black,' said Beste-Chetwynde with relish. 'Poor little brute!' said Paul;"⁵ the conversation turns to other matters. Tangent is only briefly mentioned once again before we learn that his foot has been amputated, in a sentence juxtaposed ironically with other matters: "Everybody else, however, was there except little Lord Tangent, whose foot was being amputated at the local nursing-home. The boys for the most part welcomed the event as a pleasant variation to the rather irregular routine of their day."⁶ Finally, in a statement which expresses perfectly the callousness and horrifying pettiness which Waugh is trying to convey, we learn Tangent's fate. It is spoken by his mother, Lady Circumference, upon being invited to Paul and Margot's wedding: "'It's maddenin' Tangent having died just at this time,' she said. 'People may think that that's my reason for refusin'.'"⁷ Another less notable example of this technique is Flossie's death in Vile Bodies. First, we learn that a young lady had tried to swing on a

chandelier and that they are bathing her head with champagne. There is no suggestion that the accident was fatal until six pages later. Lottie Crump complains to Adam, "But what I mind, I said, is having a death in the house and all the fuss."⁸

Waugh introduces his most shocking revelation of the "primitive hostility of the world" in this characteristic casual manner. There is a brief reference at the beginning of Black Mischief to the cannibalistic tendencies of the natives when Seth is told his father has been eaten. Nothing more is said until much later in the book Basil says to Prudence: "'You're a grand girl, Prudence, and I'd like to eat you.'"⁹ We are still unsuspecting when we learn that Prudence and the plane she was in have disappeared and been swallowed up by the jungle. It comes as a shock when the headman answers Basil's insistent queries: "'The white woman? Why here,' he patted his distended paunch. 'You and I and the big chiefs--we have just eaten her.'"¹⁰ Basil's reaction is not recorded. Instead this revelation is followed by a passage devoid of all emotional response in which the unreasonable and the savage asserts itself completely:

Round and round circled the dancers, ochre and blood and sweat glistening in the firelight; the wise men's headgear swayed high above them, leopards' feet and snake skins, amulets and necklaces, lions' teeth and the shrivelled bodies of bats and toads, jigging and spinning. Tireless hands drumming out the rhythm; glistening backs heaving and shivering in the shadows.

Later, a little after midnight, it began to rain.¹¹

The mindless, incessant, circling dance of the natives completes the vision of the irrationality of the universe which the unmoved headman's horrible revelation has presented. The final reference to the rain is a reminder of the silent, ever-present indifference of nature.

It has already been suggested that man manifests the same indifference and cruelty as nature. This is true as much of civilized man as primitive man. Beneath the surface of society lie the same primitive instincts, the same irrationality. It is a symptom of the violence of the age that the Bollinger Club in Decline and Fall entertains itself by stoning a caged fox to death with champagne bottles. Prendergast's murder by a lunatic who saws off his head takes nearly half an hour, but the warden ignores his screams because he wants to teach the reform-minded Governor, Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery, a lesson. The incident is reported during the singing of a hymn in a chapel:

'O God, our help in ages past,' sang Paul.
 'Where's Prendergast to-day?'
 'What, ain't you eard? 'e's been done in.'
 'And our eternal home.'¹²

Reported in this manner, Prendergast's death is highly comical. The sense of indifference is furthered by the comment that, "From all points of view it was lucky that the madman had chosen Mr. Prendergast for attack."¹³ The

most complete indictment of modern society's immunity to the pain and suffering of others is Lord Tangent's death, which has already been discussed, but there are other less dramatic examples of the perversion of normal human feeling. The treatment which Paul receives at the hands of society is undeniably brutal, despite the comic tone used to describe it. He is attacked and stripped of his clothes by a group of drunken students and as a consequence expelled from university for indecent exposure by officials who are well aware that he is innocent. Under the same pretext he is deprived of his inheritance by a rapacious guardian and forced to accept an ill-paying and inferior teaching position. Later, on the basis of testimony by an old friend he is sentenced to seven years' penal servitude for innocently assisting his fiancée Margot with her business, which turns out to be a chain of brothels. Margot is not even mentioned in court. In the end, restitution is made to Paul, but the savagery, hypocrisy and indifference of modern life has been exposed.

The characters in Vile Bodies are also treated with ruthlessness and indifference by society. Adam's hopes for the future are destroyed when the Customs officer gleefully burns the only copy of his autobiography. Later Adam himself becomes a victimizer when he casually sells Nina to Ginger for the price of his hotel bill and then commits adultery with her while Ginger is away. When

Agatha Runcible has her accident Adam and her friends have a snack before looking for her. Miles is pleased that he will have a story for his column. It is typical of the Bright Young People that they accuse Miles' racing friend of being heartless but are totally blind to their own callousness. They hold rousing parties round Agatha's bedside, although she is gravely ill and when she dies the only friend who attends her funeral is Adam. We are notified of her death in Waugh's typical off-hand manner by a brief comment from Adam. The Earl of Balcairn's suicide is reported in a similar, detached tone. The only comment on his death is Adam's: "Well, a pretty mess he's let us in for, sixty-two writs for libel up to date and more coming in. And that's not the worst. Left me do his job and mine."¹⁴

A Handful of Dust also demonstrates the mindless cruelty and indifference of society. This theme of society's callousness is introduced at the very beginning of the novel, when, rejoicing over the damage a fire has done to a house the decorator, Mrs. Beaver, announces that no one was hurt "except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof onto the paved court!"¹⁵ Brenda and her friends demonstrate their insensitivity to Tony's feelings for Brenda and his home when they attempt to provide him with another woman and redecorate Hetton, but this initial insensitivity becomes

cruel indifference when John Andrew is killed. Brenda's reaction to the news that John is dead is simply relief that Jock is referring to her son, not to John Beaver:

"John . . . John Andrew . . . I . . . oh, thank God. . . ."16

Later, after Tony refuses to let Brenda sue him for two thousand pounds, the comments of her friends summarize the unfairness and irrationality: "'It's too monstrous that he should be allowed to get away with it.' . . . 'It's so like Brenda to trust everyone,' said Jenny Abdul Akbar. . . . 'I do think Tony comes out of this pretty poorly,' said Marjorie."17 And Brenda says: "I'm very fond of Tony, you know, in spite of the monstrous way he behaved!"18

In Black Mischief the "primitive hostility of the world" Camus speaks of is identified with what Waugh calls the "instincts of swamp and forest," whose irrationality and cruelty are impervious to the attempts of so-called civilized man to assert order and reason. The natives of Azania are themselves identified with the blind impulses of nature and are aligned with them. Their resistance to the organization of civilization and their distortion of it is the same manifestation as the resistance of the jungle and the forces of nature to civilization. The natives who eat Prudence are moved by the same irrational forces which operate in the lions who carry off railway builders; the mosquitoes, snakes, tsetse flies and spirillum

ticks which plague the builders; the torrents from the hills which tear down the work of months and the heat which makes work almost impossible. The motor-car blocking the road becomes a symbol of this resistance to order. The car itself, its tires eaten by white ants and the remnants of its body converted into a house by a Sakuyu family through the addition of rags, tin, mud and grass, is a symbol of the deterioration of modern ideas in primitive surroundings; but eventually its very presence on the road becomes symbolic. Throughout the novel the Sakuyu family and the grotesque structure itself resist all the efforts of the authorities to remove it. At the end we learn that the authorities are having a road built around the car.

On the other hand, Seth's European education has given him just enough rationality and individuality to destroy his "harmony with the primitive promptings of humanity."¹⁹ He experiences what might be called a feeling of the absurd in the face of "the primitive hostility of the world":

In his room at the top of the old fort Seth lay awake and alone, his eyes wild with the inherited terror of the jungle, desperate with the acquired loneliness of civilization. Night was alive with beasts and devils and the spirits of dead enemies; before its power Seth's ancestors had receded, slid away from its attack, abandoning in retreat all the baggage of Individuality; they had lain six or seven in a hut; between them and night only a wall of mud and a ceiling of thatched grass; warm, naked bodies breathing in the darkness an arm's reach apart, indivisibly unified so that they ceased to be six or seven scared

blacks and became one person of more than human stature, less vulnerable to the peril that walked near them. Seth could not expand to meet the onset of fear. He was alone, dwarfed by the magnitude of the darkness, insulated from his fellows, strapped down to mean dimensions.²⁰

Civilization has alienated Seth from his fellow man and deprived him of the irrational belief in magic with which to face an equally irrational universe. Usually a comic figure in the novel, at this point Seth is treated with a seriousness which is rarely overt in Waugh and reappears only once in Black Mischief when Basil discovers Seth's body. Perhaps Waugh's own perception of the cruelty and strangeness of nature, more apparent in the primitive societies which he was then visiting, was for once too intense for laughter.

Waugh presents a comic version of the absurd in the final section of the novel. I refer to the song from Gilbert and Sullivan which ridicules civilized man's insistence on finding reasons for the behavior of nature and the things of nature:

On a tree by a river a little tom tit
 Sang Willow, tit-willow, tit-willow.
 And I said to him "Dicky bird, why do you sit
 Singing Willow, tit-willow, tit-willow?"

 "Is it weakness of intellect, birdie?" I cried,
 "Or a rather tough worm in your little inside?"
 With a shake of his poor little head, he replied,
 "Oh willow, tit-willow, tit-willow."²¹

Scoop reveals a similar picture of civilized man struggling against the irrational jungle: "They came as missionaries, ambassadors, tradesmen, prospectors, natural

scientists. None returned. They were eaten, every one of them."²² The hostile presence of nature in a world without God is briefly suggested by the last line of the book:

"Outside the owls hunted maternal rodents and their furry brood."²³ The position of this sentence gives it a significance it would not otherwise have and emphasizes the endless cycle of nature, indifferent to and unaffected by man's striving and folly. Earlier, William's prayer to the great crested grebe comically suggests that the only God is nature herself, personified by the great bird: "'Oh, great crested grebe,' he prayed, 'maligned fowl, have I not expiated the wrong my sister did you; am I still to be an exile from the green places of my heart? . . .'"²⁴

The hostility and anarchy of nature is nowhere more apparent than in the jungle. In A Handful of Dust as Tony and Dr. Messinger enter the jungle they see in the dilapidated remains of civilization around them the embodiment of the defeat of reason and order by the forces of irrationality. The helplessness of man's reason in the face of this irrationality is illustrated by Dr. Messinger's futile efforts to chart the area. Nothing makes sense; the rivers run north and south alternately and the Indians have the same name for all the rivers. The Indians themselves, who are characterized as animals,²⁵ reflect the inscrutability and irrationality of the jungle. It is impossible to communicate reasonably with them and they

answer Dr. Messinger's questions with silence or incomprehensible replies:

Every day Dr. Messinger asked Rosa, "When will the boats be ready? Ask the men," And she replied, "Just now."

"Rosa, we have decided to take you down the river with us. We need you to help us talk to the men. Understand?"

Rosa said nothing; her face was perfectly blank. . . .

"Understand?"

But still she said nothing; she seemed to be looking over their heads into the dark forest, but her eyes were lost in shadow.²⁶

CHAPTER IV

A SENSE OF INCONGRUITY AND DISRELATION

"The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation."¹

The coexistence of so many contradictory and irreconcilable attitudes, beliefs and ways of perceiving reality has created a feeling of alienation and disorientation in modern man. Waugh conveys the sense of disintegration in modern life through the juxtaposition of incongruities. Since the incongruity between media and media, awareness and awareness, fact and intention, and so on, is precisely what gives rise to the feeling of the absurd, by juxtaposing these incongruities, Waugh brings about a confrontation which reveals the absurdity emphasizing the "divorce" which Camus sees as the essence of the absurd. Essentially, the incongruity is between man's perception of reality, that is, his awareness, and his actual environment, whether in the form of his physical surroundings or in terms of the awareness of the people around him.

Waugh's novels abound with examples of characters who are out of touch with their environment: they are in a situation of "disrelation" as Susan Sontag would say.²

In Decline and Fall Sir Wilfred dreams of becoming known as a great penal reformer, but his grasp of the situation is somewhat limited. He insists on applying his cherished theories, whether or not they have any relevance, and his desire to be innovative leads to some ludicrous ideas. When the Chief Warder reports that the prisoners are eating paste issued to them in the Bookbinding Shop Sir Wilfred suggests that the nutritional value of the paste should be determined by weighing the men. Paul's desire for the peace and quiet of solitude is interpreted in complex, psycho-analytical terms and the prescribed remedy is afternoon exercise with a lunatic. Sir Wilfred's belief that the prisoners should be allowed to carry on with their professions in prison finally leads to murder when this same lunatic, sentenced for decapitating a man, is allowed to work as a carpenter and saws the Chaplain's head off. In comparison with Sir Wilfred's behavior, the lunatic seems almost normal.

It is important to remember that the presence of a large number of unreconciled attitudes and beliefs in the modern world is partly due to the sudden proximity of very diverse cultures which technology has brought about. In Black Mischief the incongruity is created by the juxtaposition of the ideas and awareness of European civilization and those of a primitive society. The attempts to impose modern ideas which have evolved out of one situation on a radically different situation, with which these ideas have

nothing in common, is shown to be both comic and absurd. The natives of Azania, whose perception of reality is completely different from modern man's awareness, distort and resist the concepts of modernization. When the railroad is being built the Sakuyu wrench up the steel sleepers to make spear heads and pull down sections of telegraph wire to make jewelry for the women. Later, when the railway is finished, "The first few trains caused numerous deaths among the inhabitants, who for some time did not appreciate the speed or strength of this new thing that had come to their country."³ When boots are issued to the army the natives joyously prepare a feast and eat them. The Birth Control campaign is supported by the tribesmen and villagers against all expectation because of a basic misunderstanding created by a widely publicized birth control poster which contrasts the well-being of a small family with the poverty of a large one:

See: on right hand: there is rich man: Smoke pipe like big chief: but his wife she no good: sit eating meat: and rich man no good: he only one son.

See: on left hand: poor man: not much to eat: but his wife she very good, work hard in field: man he good too: eleven children one very mad, very holy. And in the middle: Emperor's juju. Make you like that good man with eleven children.

And as a result . . . the peasantry began pouring into town for the gala, eagerly awaiting initiation to the fine new magic of virility and fecundity.⁴

This same misunderstanding of modern ideas is expressed in Viscount Boay's speech at the banquet honoring representatives of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals:

It is my privilege and delight this evening to welcome with open arms of brotherly love to our city Dame Mildred

Porch and Miss Tin, two ladies renowned throughout the famous country of Europe for their great cruelty to animals. . . . We too, in our small way, are cruel to our animals. . . . Ladies and gentlemen, we must be Modern, we must be refined in our Cruelty to Animals.⁵

The embodiment of this conflict between the awareness of one culture and that of another in Black Mischief is the Emperor Seth. An almost schizophrenic character, the combination of a primitive African and an educated man, Seth has but superficially understood the ideas of modern civilization. Like many civilized men, he is fooled into believing in a world created by language but which has no relation to the reality around him. He is not as shrewd as his grandfather Amurath, who cleverly employed language to outwit the white man at his own game and concealed the barbarism of his country under a nominal civilization by declaring laws which were not implemented. Seth also uses words without relating them to facts, but he does not recognize their fictional nature. His situation is analogous to the situation of the man Camus describes who attacks a group of machine guns with a sword; his behavior is absurd "by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter."⁶ At the beginning of the novel Seth, disregarding the uncertainty of victory and the absence of money, sits isolated in the old fort and dictates letters proclaiming victory and a public holiday in honor

of it, ordering motor-cars, uniforms, furniture, and an electric plant, and issuing invitations to his coronation. Around himself he creates a world constructed solely of words and a hypnotic belief in the slogans of the New Age which parodies the wilful blindness of many civilized men: "The whole might of Evolution rides behind him: at my stirrups run woman's suffrage, vaccination and vivisection. I am the New Age. I am the Future."⁷ As the book progresses, Seth becomes more and more erratic: "ideas bubbled up within him, bearing to the surface a confused sediment of phrase and theory, scraps of learning half understood and fantastically translated."⁸ His enthusiasm for one idea after another, without discriminating between the worthwhile and the "faddish," satirizes the similar behavior of Western man and the rapid obsolescence of ideas in modern society. In just one memo to Basil he writes:

For your information and necessary action, I have decided to abolish the following:

Death penalty.

Marriage.

The Sakuyu language and all native dialects.

Infant mortality.

Totemism.

Inhuman butchery.

Mortgages.

Emigration.

Please see to this. Also organize system of resevoirs for city's water supply and draft syllabus for competitive examination for public services.

Suggest compulsory Esperanto. Seth.⁹

The absurdity of the memo arises from the divorce between the facts and Seth's intentions. Language is used to relate

totally incompatible concepts. As Seth produces more and more similarly incongruous ideas he reminds us of Agatha Runcible speeding out of control in Vile Bodies.

Seth is not the only one in Black Mischief who is out of touch with the reality of his situation. Sir Joseph Mannering and Lady Seal live in the Edwardian past and plan Basil's life in "their fire-lit, nursery game of 'let's pretend.'"¹⁰ The Trumpingtons spend their days in bed, drinking, playing games and refusing to hear what is going on in the world around them. The British Legation in Azania continues the frivolous way of life it has imported from England, a way of life which when contrasted with the massacres and wars going on around it, seems unreal and absurd. If the fantasy world of the British consists of games and frivolous diversions, the French Delegation exists in an imaginary world of intrigue, the center of which are the unsuspecting British. The disrelation between the "world" of the British and that of the French emphasizes the relative nature of man's perception of reality. In their earnestness the French seek a coherent pattern and meaning even in the most trivial action of the British. The result is nonsensical. At one point French officials work all night deciphering a coded telegram which the British received and which is nothing more than a move in a game of chess someone at the British Legation is playing.

A Handful of Dust deals with the absurdity of twentieth-century life in a less impersonal manner than the other novels because it concentrates directly on the experience of one man, on his inability to find a lasting and meaningful purpose in an unreasonable and indifferent world. Above all Tony's situation is characterized by alienation. Escaping from the complexities and anxieties of his own age he lives in an imaginary world, inherited from the past. He spends all his time at his country estate, Hetton Abbey, which becomes a symbol of his fantasy world, stays away from his contemporaries, and generally plays the role of a gentleman of the old school. He is out of touch with modern England and his situation is absurd because he lives by a code belonging to a different environment. This absurdity, however, only becomes apparent when his outdated way of life is confronted by the new way of life. His humanistic values inherited from the past are totally incompatible with the new morality of his wife and her friends. This existence, side by side, of two contradictory ways of life and of viewing life creates a sense of absurdity which is emphasized by the breakdown in communication between the two worlds and epitomized by the clash in architectural styles which Brenda's desire to redecorate brings about. The inadequacy and inapplicability of his humanism in the modern world becomes obvious when Tony is confronted with

the facts of his son's death and wife's desertion. At first he deludes himself about Brenda; then, when he finally realizes that she is completely callous, the last fragments of the imaginary world which was his escape are destroyed. He is left with nothing:

for a month now he had lived in a world suddenly bereft of order; it was as though the whole reasonable and decent constitution of things, the sum of all he had experienced or learned to expect, were an inconspicuous, inconsiderable object mislaid somewhere on the dressing table; no outrageous circumstance in which he found himself, no new, mad thing brought to his notice, could add a jot to the all-encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears.¹¹

The sense of "a world suddenly bereft of order," of "the all-encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears," is certainly the same experience which Camus has called a sense of the absurd.

For a while Tony moves through life mechanically, completely alienated from what is around him. Soon, however, he escapes into another imaginary world, this time searching for a lost city in South America. This search, described in the second half of the book, ironically parallels the first half. Tony's search for the lost city is clearly related to a search for the lost values symbolized by Hetton and this second fantasy world imitates the first: "It [the city] was Gothic in character, all vanes and pinnacles, gargoyles, battlements, groining and tracery, pavilions and terraces, a transfigured Hetton. . . ." ¹² Ironically, it is while he is in a

delirious state, when his fantasies merge with reality, that Tony recognizes his dreams have no substance: "There is no City. Mrs. Beaver has covered it with chromium plating and converted it into flats,"¹³ he tells Mr. Todd. This recognition comes while he is drinking bitter medicine and it is a bitter awareness of the meaninglessness and sterility of modern life which has come to Tony.

The ending of the novel is heavily ironic, but it needs this irony to make it bearable. Poor Tony, who is "delighted to" read Dickens to the half-civilized Mr. Todd when first asked, is doomed to read Mr. Todd's collection of Dickens to him until one of them dies. No rescue is possible; everyone believes Tony is dead. Tony's fate in South America simply actualizes the divorce between him and the modern world of Brenda and her crowd. His existence in the hostile jungle amid the Victorians of Dickens is a parody of his earlier life in which he was isolated from his contemporaries and lost in the dreams of the past. Buried alive and separated from other civilized men, he is forced to read about the past he once relished, an endless, purposeless activity which suggests Sisyphus rolling his stone up the slope over and over again.

The incongruity between the awareness of primitive man and that of civilized man is also presented in A Handful

of Dust. The Indians' different concept of time proves extremely frustrating to the white men. To Dr. Messinger's insistent questioning about the length of time it will take to build some boats the Indians, who, like children, live only in the present, repeatedly answer "Just now." The white man's systematic apprehension of space is foreign to the Indians, who have no maps, use the same name for all the rivers, and yet know the jungle perfectly while Dr. Messinger wanders aimlessly. The incident which best illustrates the divorce between the Indians' awareness and that of the white man is the toy mouse demonstration. Dr. Messinger, who claims to "know the Indian mind,"¹⁴ is left bewildered as the green and white toys drive the natives permanently away.

Waugh's other novel about Africa, Scoop, also contains several examples of the disrelation between the Western and African mind. One of the few notable ones is the information that Europeans came to Ishmaelia "furnished with suitable equipment of cuckoo clocks, phonographs, opera hats, draft-treaties and flags of the nations which they had been obliged to leave."¹⁵ The incongruity of these things in the jungle is obvious.

By contrasting the city dweller's feeling of disorientation in the country with the country man's feeling of disorientation in the city Waugh obtains some excellent comic effects in Scoop and demonstrates the

the disparity in the awareness of men shaped by the radically different environments which coexist in the twentieth century. When William arrives in the city he finds it a strange, alienating world in which everything, even people, seems to be part of a huge mechanism and the environment is artificially controlled. He walks along unnaturally silent passages, sleeps in a room where a gentle whining note "conditions" the atmosphere, and wakes up late in the morning in total darkness. For Mr. Salter the country is an equally alien world and he perceives it with a consciousness molded by modern technology: "'The country,' for him, meant what you saw in the train between Liverpool Street and Frinton. . . . Normal life, as he saw it, consisted in regular journeys by electric train, monthly cheques, communal amusements and a cosy horizon of slates and chimneys. . . ." ¹⁶ When Mr. Salter visits Boot Magna the country proves as alien and hostile as he expects. He is nearly squashed to death by a lorry and arrives at the house "dirty and blistered and aching in every limb," ¹⁷ and feeling that: "He was in a strange country. These people were not his people nor their laws his. He felt like a Roman legionary, heavily armed, weighted with the steel and cast brass of civilization, tramping through forests beyond the Roman pale, harassed by silent, elusive savages, the vangard of an advance that had pushed too far and lost touch with the base. . . ." ¹⁸ This is a comic

version of the modern experience of alienation. The scene at the dinner table is a burlesque expression of the social pressures which modern man feels himself subjected to. As he sits at the table he is not allowed to say a word;

"Mr. Salter is having Amabel to sleep with him," said Mrs. Boot.

"Mr. Salter is very fond of her," said Lady Frilley.

"He doesn't know her," said Uncle Bernard.

"He's very fond of all dogs," said Mrs. Boot.¹⁹

The conversation goes on in this manner.

In Vile Bodies Waugh explores the effect of technology on the awareness of modern man. At one point Shakespeare's poetic vision of England in Richard II is evoked by Ginger who tries to quote it to Nina while they are up in a plane:

"This sceptre'd isle, this earth of majesty, this something or other Eden"? D'you know what I mean?--"this happy breed of men, this little world, this precious stone set in the silver sea. . . .

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

This nurse; this teeming womb of royal kings
Feared by their breed and famous by their
birth. . . ."20

But Nina's perception is altogether different:

Nina looked down and saw inclined at an odd angle a horizon of straggling red suburb; arterial roads dotted with little cars; factories, some of them working, others empty and decaying; a disused canal; some distant hills sown with bungalows; wireless masts and overhead power cables; men and women were indiscernible except as tiny spots. . . . The scene lurched and tilted again as the aeroplane struck a current of air.²¹

The plane provides a new means of perception which

ironically displaces the poetic vision, and this incompatibility of perceptions gives rise to a feeling of absurdity. The car, too, is shown as altering man's awareness of his surroundings. Viewed from a speeding vehicle the world becomes, as in Agatha's nightmares, "a fog spinning past,"²² a confusion of images and impressions which man cannot organize into a coherent pattern: in other words, absurd. Waugh's portrayal of the power of the press to create a new awareness emphasizes the contradiction between the event and the event reported. On the one hand, the trivial incident of the party at the Prime Minister's residence is blown up to such proportions that it brings about a national crisis. On the other hand, a more serious event, Flossie's death in Lottie's hotel, is underplayed so that it goes by unnoticed:

"Which only showed, thought Adam, how much better Lottie Crump knew the business of avoiding undesirable publicity than Sir James Brown."²³ It is not what happens, but how the event is perceived that is relevant. Another comic example of the way in which language can determine perception occurs when Adam misconstrues the meaning of the film crew's references to "shooting."²⁴ Colonel Blount's movie illustrates the potential of film to offer a different perception of reality, a distorted perception whereby uniformed horsemen gallop backwards, characters move at unnatural speeds, and the heads of dancers disappear

above the top of the screen or they sink waist-deep below it.²⁵ Nevertheless, this erratic world on the screen reflects the truth about the world presented in Vile Bodies: its chaotic nature; the frantic and confused action of its characters; the difficulties they have in finding a place in their environment, like the dancers who slip on and off the screen; and their futile attempts to communicate which suggest the soundless but visible talking and singing of the movie characters. Waugh thus demonstrates the many different and contradictory perceptions of reality which technology has created in the twentieth century and which give rise by their incongruity to a feeling of absurdity.

CHAPTER V

MONTAGE, COLLAGE AND FILM TECHNIQUE

In an article on Ronald Firbank Waugh contrasts nineteenth-century novelists' "complete submission to the idea of the succession of events in an arbitrarily limited period of time"¹ with the device of "counterpoint" which Firbank developed. Instead of presenting the action of his novels as a succession of events in a cause and effect relation, Firbank's "compositions" are built up as a series of counterpointed conversations and images. Waugh writes: "They may be compared to cinema films in which the relation of caption and photograph is directly reversed; occasionally a brief, visual image flashed out to illumine and explain the flickering succession of spoken words."² By its arbitrary imposition of order the nineteenth-century form of the novel implied a coherent vision of the world and Waugh recognizes its inadequacy for conveying the chaos and irrationality of the twentieth century. He describes Firbank's method as "a new balanced interrelation of subject and form,"³ and suggests that offers a means of expressing the absurdity and confusion of modern life through form, not just content.⁴

"Counterpoint," a device which Waugh himself

frequently employs, might more aptly be called the technique of "montage" in view of the author's interest in film and film technique. The technique of montage enables Waugh to suggest the confusion and absurdity of modern life. Using it Waugh can move arbitrarily through space portraying many disassociated fragments of action which take place at the same moment. He can move the action from one random point in time to another without providing a logical connection. This procedure destroys the sense of order which sequential action creates, and it contributes to the feeling of incoherence, and emphasizes the disintegration of the world which the novelist is describing. Montage also makes it possible for Waugh to juxtapose and parallel an indefinite number of incidents or situations. By it he can draw analogies between seemingly divorced situations and evoke the general atmosphere of modern society.

When Colonel Blount shows his film near the end of Vile Bodies, the disconnected fragments of action which appear, the tendency of the film to get faster and faster when the story reaches a climax, and even the way the film ends suddenly in a flash as the lights go off, bear a striking resemblance to the manner in which the novel itself is written. In the very first chapter Waugh uses the montage technique. He shifts from group to group, offers snatches of conversation here and there, "freezes" time by using the singing of Mrs. Melrose Ape as a

reference point, and conveys the pervading sense of sea-sickness which parallels the spiritual malaise of the characters. This technique of moving about at random from one unrelated scene to another predominates throughout the novel. Fragments of conversation between various groups in society, including two on a train between lower-middle class characters whom we never meet again, are interpolated to suggest the contradictory values which are held by modern men. The only continuity is provided by Adam's and Nina's attempts to get married. The impression of an ever-increasing tempo in the lives of the characters is created by cramming more and more incidents and fragments of conversation on a page. For example, the exchanges of the racing-car drivers suggest the intensity of the lives they lead and imitate the accelerating tempo of a race. The shorter and shorter phrases build up to a crescendo:

" . . . Only offers a twenty pound bonus this
 year . . ."
 " . . . lapped at seventy-five . . ."
 " . . . Burst his gasket and blew out his cylinder
 heads . . ."
 " . . . Broke both arms and cracked his skull in
 two places . . ."
 " . . . Tailwag . . ."
 " . . . Speed-wobble . . ."
 " . . . Merc . . ."
 " . . . Mag . . ."
 " . . . crash . . . "5

And the ending of the novel in which the whole world erupts into a war suggests the sudden flash ending of the film.

In Black Mischief Waugh uses montage to contrast the serious events taking place in Azania with the frivolity of the British Legation and the ludicrous earnestness of the French. At another point he "freezes" time and presents a series of brief and anonymous responses to the Azanian crisis to convey British indifference to what is a matter of life and death to many Azanians: another example of contrasting awareness. Lady Seal's narration of Basil's misdemeanors illustrates how the technique of montage is applied to dialogue (the ellipses are Waugh's):

. . . if his father were alive . . . spent all the money his Aunt left him on that idiotic expedition to Afghanistan . . . give him a very handsome . . . all and more than all that I can afford . . . paid his debts again and again . . . no gratitude . . . no self-control . . . no longer a child, twenty-eight this year . . . his father . . . the post kind Sir William secured him in the bank in Brazil . . .⁶

The fragments of dialogue emphasize the complexity and confusion of Basil's life and also narrate it economically. A similar technique in the form of snatches of conversation is later employed to suggest the chaos at the British Legation when violence erupts after the Birth Control Pageant.⁷

Waugh uses montage in A Handful of Dust, jumping back and forth between Brenda's life in London and Tony's at Hetton, to emphasize that they live in completely different worlds. When John Andrew is killed, Tony's

shock at his death and his deep concern for Brenda is an ironic comment on the frivolity of Brenda's lifestyle, with which it is juxtaposed, and emphasizes the horror of her unnatural response. The second half of the book alternates between scenes in London and Tony's life in the jungle, which parallel and comment on each other. For example, Jock Grant-Menzies' question about pigs in Parliament comes right after the Indians' reference to pig-hunting. The filibustering and incomprehensibility of the Members of Parliament is thus related to the inscrutability and side-tracking of the jungle people. The seemingly irrational behavior of the Indians is a comment on the incompetence of civilized government. Tony's increasing difficulties in the jungle parallel Brenda's difficulties in London and they both reach their lowest point at the same time. The suggestion is that Tony's life in South America is not much different from his life in England and is characterized by the same experience of irrationality and indifference. The merging of the two worlds in Tony's nightmares reinforces this impression. In effect, England and English society are being compared to a jungle.

Waugh uses film terminology in his essay "Ronald Firbank" to describe Firbank's montage technique, and it is difficult to say whether Waugh's use of the method was derived from Firbank or film. Robert Murray Davis claims

that Waugh borrowed several important techniques from film:⁸ the ability to translate ideas and attitudes into visual terms, to control the audience's physical distance from the action, to shift rapidly from scene to scene without formal transition and to control the speed of the action. The last two have already been discussed. The ability to translate ideas and attitudes into visual terms is exemplified in his objective method of characterization, but this did not originate with film. However, the detached tone that Waugh maintains in the novels, which makes even tragic happenings comic and absurd, is reinforced by the very definite impression of a "long shot" that we frequently have when we visualize the scenes in the novels. It is achieved by Waugh's method of describing scenes so that we are aware of surrounding details, of using many scenes which involve group action and of involving his characters' entire bodies in his descriptions of their actions. French film maker Jean-Luc Godard has commented, "tragedy is close-up and comedy is long shot."⁹ The psychological and spatial distance which Waugh usually keeps between us and his characters alienates us from their suffering and makes them comic and robot-like. The detached tone with which even the most horrifying incidents are described produces what Brecht calls an "alienation effect." Because Waugh's characters are generally viewed from the outside so that we are not

acquainted with their innermost feelings, and because of our physical distance from them, we regard them in a detached and amused manner. At crucial moments, when we might identify with a character, Waugh deliberately fails to let us know the character's response. Thus, when Basil discovers that he has just consumed his girlfriend, Prudence, our attention is switched from him and our physical distance from the scene is increased as we are given a description of the dancers. The cruel fates of Agatha Runcible, Prudence and Lord Tangent fail to move us because they are such lightly drawn characters and because Waugh's detached reporting of these events is so absurdly at odds with the tone we expect. Much that is serious and even tragic thus appears at least superficially comic, although our laughter is at times combined with horror.

Martin Esslin speaks of silent film comedy as having the "dreamlike strangeness of a world seen from the outside with the uncomprehending eyes of one cut off from reality."¹⁰ The Birth Control Pageant in Black Mischief, viewed from the point of view of Mildred Porch and Sarah Tin who are sitting at a distance on a roof and unable to understand what is going on, is presented as a silent film comedy. Waugh gives us a hint that he is using a "film technique" by having the two ladies record what they can with a camera. Because the point of view is distant, despite the violence and horror the scene remains comic.

At the same time, this bewildering and incomprehensible world around the ladies possesses the "dreamlike strangeness" which characterizes the absurd. Waugh also introduces the principle of montage by interrupting the ladies' viewing: they fall asleep, go for food and hide from the shooting. By cutting up the scene in this manner Waugh suggests the passage of time and the confusion of these historical events.

In Scoop Waugh specifically identifies the cinematic origins of one scene: "To the spectators at the back of the crowd, out of earshot of the minor sounds, the sequence unfolded itself with the happy inconsequence of an early comedy film."¹¹ The scene referred to uses the viewpoints of Mr. Baldwin and William at the back of a crowd to present a "long shot" which shows Dr. Benito confidently giving a speech proclaiming the ideals of the new regime from a balcony while below Eric Olafsen tears the place apart and heads upstairs. The scene, like a silent comedy film, reduces Dr. Benito to an absurd figure in disrelation with his surroundings. His pantomime suggests Camus' description of man's absurdity: "A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive."¹² Of course, Waugh's description is a comic long-shot version of this absurdity however remote it appears from Camus' seriousness.

The telegram in which William Boot sends his first story and which is later to become a legend, "quoted in books of reminiscence, held up as a model to aspiring pupils of Correspondence Schools of Profitable Writing, perennially fresh in the jaded memories of a hundred editors,"¹³ might well be quoted as a model of Waugh's style:

NOTHING MUCH HAS HAPPENED EXCEPT TO THE PRESIDENT WHO HAS BEEN IMPRISONED IN HIS OWN PALACE BY REVOLUTIONARY JUNTA HEADED BY SUPERIOR BLACK CALLED BENITO AND RUSSIAN JEW WHO BANNISTER SAYS IS UP TO NO GOOD THEY SAY HE IS DRUNK WHEN HIS CHILDREN TRY TO SEE HIM BUT GOVERNESS SAYS MOST UNUSUAL LOVELY SPRING WEATHER BUBONIC PLAGUE RAGING.¹⁴

The impersonal tone, the understatement, and the indiscriminating association of the serious and the trivial in the telegram suggest Waugh's own style in the novels. At the same time, juxtaposing various unrelated and incongruous events, the telegram is a useful example of the author's montage technique.

To collate incongruous objects, ideas and words Waugh sometimes employs a technique which is best described as "collage." The passage describing the contents of Colonel Blount's library is an example of a collage of objects:

There were several magazines in the library--mostly cheap weeklies devoted to the cinema. There was a stuffed owl and a case of early British remains, bone pins and bits of pottery and a skull, which had been dug up in the park many years ago and catalogued by Nina's governess. . . . There were some bookcases of superbly unreadable books, a gun, a butterfly net, and alpenstock in the corner. There were catalogues of agricultural machines and acetylene plants,

lawn mowers, "sports requisites." There was a fire screen worked with a coat of arms.¹⁵

The room contains the typically incongruous assortment of things which characterizes the modern age. It is a metaphor of the twentieth century regarded as a collection of all the residue of the past together with an assortment of new things, a figure that is to say, of total chaos. Such lists of objects which convey the spirit of the age appear several times in the novels. In A Handful of Dust, for example, there is a list of the contents of Jenny's apartment and this list includes a "Tudor style" radio set,¹⁶ an object only possible in an age which makes all ages its own. In Scoop there is the list of William's purchases, suggesting the explosion of ideas and ingenuity in this century: ". . . a collapsible canoe, a jointed flagstaff and Union Jack, . . . a portable humidior, guaranteed to preserve cigars in condition in the Red Sea, and a Christmas hamper complete with Santa Claus costume and tripod mistletoe stand. . . ." ¹⁷

In A Handful of Dust collage is employed to convey the "climate" of the times when Brenda reads from the papers (the ellipses are Waugh's):

Reggie's been making another speech . . . There's such an extraordinary picture of Babe and Jock . . . a woman in America has had twins by two different husbands. Would you have thought that possible? . . . Two more chaps in gas ovens . . . a little girl has been strangled in a cemetery with a boot lace . . . that play we went to about a farm is coming off.¹⁸

By "counterpointing" the trivial and the horrible the passage reveals the contradictory patterns of modern life. Brenda's indifferent tone suggests the numbing effect of what might be called the "data overload" to which contemporary man is subjected.

Finally, when Tony becomes ill and delirious, the surrealistic passages describing his hallucinations are both an objectification of his state of mind and a vision of the chaos of modern life. These "collages" of fragments of dialogue and jumbled images, mixing places, incidents and people from London and South America, provide an extreme expression of Tony's lack of contact with reality and convey his anxieties and confusion. This dream world in which Tony wanders is also the counterpart of the labyrinth of contemporary life in which man wanders without a guiding principle.

CHAPTER VI

LANGUAGE

"A yawning gulf has opened between language and reality."¹

The "yawning gulf" between language and reality arises from the ability of language to create new and fictional "realities" competing with what we conventionally consider true reality. This problem is illustrated in Waugh's work, especially in Vile Bodies and Scoop by stress on the charlatanism of the Press. The epigraph at the beginning of Vile Bodies suggests the artificiality of the world of the Bright Young People:

"If I wasn't real," Alice said--half laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous--"I shouldn't be able to cry."

"I hope you don't suppose those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

The world which the Bright Young People create about themselves is a fantasy world of parties and fads. An important factor in its creation is the Press. The gossip columnists spend a lot of time and ingenuity distorting and glamorizing the activities of the social set, sometimes succeeding with remarkable results. A small party which Agatha Runcible and her friends have at No. 10 Downing Street leads to the downfall of Prime Minister Brown's

government. Agatha's life seems to be nothing but a series of newspaper articles and pictures. The ability of the Press to invent a world in which people believe and participate unreflectingly is best exemplified by Adam's gossip column. When he fabricates a Polish sculptor called Provna, "Such is the power of the Press, that soon after this a steady output of early Provnas began to travel from Warsaw to Bond Street and from Bond Street to California. . . ." ² Adam's descriptions of the habits of fictional characters leads to the new fad of wearing black suede shoes and sends people to dances in temperance hotels in Bloomsbury. The phony world invented by Adam is actually no less real than the artificial world of society in Vile Bodies. The distaste of these modern people for anything which is too real, as it were, is expressed in one of Adam's fancies: "He planned dinners of enchanting aromatic foods that should be carried under the nose snuffed and thrown to the dogs." ³

Basil Seal in Black Mischief is well aware of the power of the Press, ⁴ and there is a brief reference in A Handful of Dust to the distortions of the Press, ⁵ but Waugh's greatest indictment of the Press occurs in Scoop. Here Waugh reveals the sham of journalism, "the innuendo and intricate misrepresentations, the luscious, detailed inventions that composed contemporary history. . . ." ⁶ Corker tells William all about "the craft of journalism."

Among other things he describes one fictional account of a revolution written by a reporter who is in the wrong country and whose fake reporting leads to panic and actually causes a revolution.⁷ William discovers that what he had done in the badger article because of Priscilla's prank is being done every day by journalists. Ironically, when the facts are there the journalists in Scoop do not recognize them.

The ability of the Press to distort, invent or conceal reality is matched by the similar power of political clichés. Waugh's parodies of Communist and Fascist slogans are only too close to the illogicality of the real thing. The Negro consul of the Fascist legation announces: ". . . the Jews of Geneva, subsidized by Russian gold, have spread the story that we are a black race. Such is the ignorance, credulity, and prejudice of the tainted European states that the absurd story has been repeated in the press. . . . As you will see for yourself, we are pure Aryans."⁸ The Communist consul speaks of "that great Negro Karl Marx. . . ."⁹

William Boot's sister, Priscilla, demonstrates the precarious relationship of language to reason when she playfully makes sheer nonsense of his article on the badger by substituting "great crested grebe" for the word "badger." It is not surprising that readers who are used to the lies of the press take the article seriously: "one

lady wrote to ask whether she read him aright in thinking he condoned the practice of baiting these rare and beautiful birds with terriers and deliberately destroying their earthy homes. . . . A major in Wales challenged him categorically to produce a single authenticated case of a great crested grebe attacking young rabbits."¹⁰

As has already been suggested, contemporary man is alienated from other men as well as from his environment and is hard put to find that common ground underlying communication. Because one man's awareness is different from or even incompatible with another's, men today are unable to understand each other and their conversations are incongruous. Waugh utilizes various forms of incongruous dialogue to reveal the irrationality of the world he presents and, it seems, for his own enjoyment of sheer nonsense. An early example is the exchange between Lottie and the Doge:

"What's the name of the Prime Minister?"

"Not to-night, I don't think, mum, not as I've been informed anyway."¹¹

Alcohol too encourages nonsense:

". . . Should honour it a great esteem . . . esteem it a great honour if Mrs. Majesty and these gentlemen and His Crump . . ."

"That's all right, Judge. Another bottle coming."

". . . Should esteem it a great Crump if his honour and these Majesties and Mrs. Gentlemen . . ."¹²

Colonel Blount, Nina's father, is impossible to communicate with sensibly and the breakdown in communication is

emphasized by the meal during which he and Adam sit and read Punch, speaking only if they have a funny part to read out loud. Later, when Adam tries to tell the Colonel that he wants to marry Nina he has problems:

"What I really came about was your daughter, Nina."

"Oh, she's not taking part in the film at all. To tell you the truth, I very much doubt whether she has any real talent. . . ."

.
"I'm afraid you've forgotten me, sir, but I came here last month to see you about Nina. Well, she wanted me to tell you that I'm Mr. Chatterbox now. . . ."

"Chatterbox . . . no, my boy, I'm afraid I don't remember you. My memory's not what it was. . . . There's a Canon Chatterbox at Worcester I used to know . . . he was up at New College with me . . . unusual name."

"Mr. Chatterbox on the Daily Excess."

"No, no, my dear boy, I assure you not. He was ordained just after I went down and was chaplain somewhere abroad--Bermuda, I think. . . ."13

In Black Mischief the breakdown in communication is caused by the different views of life of various characters: their awareness is different. A conversation between Basil and his mother illustrates the dichotomy between Lady Seal's "let's pretend" Edwardian world and Basil's world:

". . . You are to meet some new girls and later have tea--I mean rooms--in Lincoln's Inn. You'll like that, won't you, dear? Only you mustn't ask about it now."

"What I came to say is that I'm just off to Azania."

"No, no, dear boy. You are to lunch with Jo at The Travellers."

"And I shall need some money."

"It's all decided."

"You see I'm fed up with London and English politics. I want to get away. . . ."14

Sir Samson's disorientation from the reality around him is

expressed in his conversation with the Bishop:

"Everyone is in a great state of alarm in the town," said the Bishop. "There are so many rumours. Tell me, Sir Sampson, do you not think really, seriously, there is any danger of a massacre?"

The Envoy Extraordinary said: "We seem to have tinned asparagus for luncheon every day . . . I can't think why. . . ."15

The minister's sermons in A Handful of Dust also illustrate how language can reveal man's estrangement from his environment. For years a minister in India, the vicar has not updated his sermons and they are models of absurdity:

"How difficult it is for us," he began, blandly surveying his congregation, who coughed into their mufflers and chafed their chilblains under their woollen gloves, "to realize that this is indeed Christmas. Instead of the glowing log fire and windows tight shuttered against the drifting snow, we have only the harsh glare of an alien sun; instead of the happy circle of loved faces, of home and family, we have the uncomprehending stares of the subjugated, though no doubt grateful, heathen. Instead of the placid ox and ass of Bethlehem," said the vicar, ". . . we have for companions the ravening tiger and the exotic camel, the furtive jackal and the ponderous elephant. . . ."16

The divorce of the words from reality is absurd and at the same time there is an ironic significance in the fact that the passage foreshadows Tony's future and first hints at the parallels between England and the jungle which are later developed.

In Scoop the divorce between one man's awareness and another's is expressed in the conversations between William and Mr. Salter. William is expecting to be fired; Salter, full of misconceptions about country people, is

nervously trying to be friendly to this alien from the country:

"How are your boots, root?" he asked.

William, glumly awaiting some fulminating rebuke, started and said, "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean brute," said Mr. Salter.

.
William saw what was up. This decent little man has been deputed to sack him and could not get it out. He came to the rescue. "I expect you want to talk about the great crested grebe."

"Good God no," said Mr. Salter, with instinctive horror, adding politely, "At least not unless you do."

"No, not at all," said William, "I thought you might want to."

"Not at all," said Mr. Salter.

"That's all right, then."

"Yes, that's all right . . ." Desperately: "I say, how about some zider?"

"Zider?"¹⁷

This comic breakdown in communication occurs because William is unable to comprehend that his little newspaper column is of no significance to the men who run the paper in the city and because Mr. Salter has a completely erroneous conception of country people. It is another example of the incompatibility between awareness and awareness in modern life.

Mrs. Stitch in Scoop is perhaps the only character who is perfectly well adjusted to the tempo and multi-consciousness of modern life and her ability to carry on several conversations simultaneously illustrates this. The result is a comic juxtaposition of unconnected thoughts:

. . . You're putting too much ivy on the turret, Arthur;

the owl won't show up unless you have him on the bare stone, and I'm particularly attached to the owl. Munera, darling, like tumtidy; always a short a in neuter plurals. It sounds like an anagram: see if "Terracotta" fits. I'm delighted to see you, John. Where have you been? . . .¹⁸

The increasing specialization of life, an aspect of the disintegration which has been discussed, renders communication difficult because of a corresponding specialization in language. The conversation of the racing-car drivers is full of incomprehensible words: "scrutineered," "tailwag," "speed-wobble,"¹⁹ are only a few examples. The telegram has a language of its own and creates a new awareness, which seems absurd if regarded in the conventional manner. Adam's wire to Nina is the first example which occurs in the novels:

DRUNK MAJOR IN REFRESHMENT TENT NOT BOGUS THIRTY-FIVE
THOUSAND MARRIED TO-MORROW EVERYTHING PERFECT AGATHA LOST
LOVE ADAM.²⁰

Scoop contains many more examples. The "journalese" of the telegram is a specialized language which serves to disguise meaning as well as convey it, as William learns when he receives his first message and needs an interpreter to tell him that he is not being ordered to stop in Aden:

OPPOSITION SPLASHING FRONTWARD SPEEDLIEST STOP ADEN
REPORTED PREPARED WARWISE FLASH FACTS BEAST.²¹

When the journalists telegraph their stories the subtleties and complexities of serious and sometimes tragic events are reduced to a series of formulas which are then translated into a new, almost unrecognizable interpretation

of reality in the stories written by the newspapers. A brief telegram becomes the source of several full-length articles. Inasmuch as it obscures meaning and distorts the truth by oversimplifying it, the telegram is instrumental in widening the gap between language and reality rather than improving communication.

Language also contributes to the anesthesia of modern man by concealing death, suffering and corruption by means of euphemisms. The clever sayings of the Bright Young People and their use of understatement suggest their state of emotional anesthesia. Horrible events are "sick-making," embarrassing ones are "shy-making." Agatha's response to being stripped and searched by the Customs officials is "too shaming." To Adam's unexpected announcement that he can't marry her Nina replies: "Oh, Adam, you are a bore. Why not?"²² In A Handful of Dust the title of the chapter in which Tony loses his son and his wife is "Hard Cheese on Tony," an expression which conveys exactly the indifferent attitude of Brenda and her friends to Tony's tragedy.

CHAPTER VII

IMAGES OF MODERN LIFE

At times Waugh introduces an image into one of the novels which acts as a symbol or expression of the absurdity of twentieth-century life. Often the image is an architectural one. Paul Pennyfeather sees King's Thursday as a "new-born monster to whose birth ageless and forgotten cultures had been in travail,"¹ and in whose life he, Margot and Peter are just "insignificant incidents." The passage invites us to compare the house to the world; the changes which it undergoes through time thus reflect the state of the world. The history of King's Thursday is described in an earlier passage and it is a history of gradual deterioration. In its present state it is a labyrinthine structure of aluminum, vita-glass and concrete where strangers coexist without meeting one another--the epitome of the modern age with its alienating environment. Little wonder that almost everyone who meets Paul compulsively tells him his life story in a monologue which typifies the absence of genuine communication. Llanaba Castle, on the other hand, is an absurd combination of country house and pseudo-medieval castle, a perfect example of the folly of the new age's unsuccessful

incorporation of outdated ideas.

Hetton Abbey in A Handful of Dust is clearly associated with Tony's values and lifestyle. Like Tony's ideals--and his devotion to Hetton is an ideal in itself--the house is outdated and incongruous in the twentieth century. Moreover, its pseudo-Gothic architecture suggests the essentially unreal character of Tony's life and ideals. Similarly, Brenda's flat and the redecorating efforts of Mrs. Beaver represent the destructiveness and sterility of the modern spirit. Like the values they represent, neither the pseudo-Gothic nor the modern style are shown to be satisfactory, outdoing each other in ugliness; juxtaposed they are absurd.

In Vile Bodies modern life is characterized by images related to motion. The epigraph introduces the theme:

"Well in our country," said Alice, still panting a little, "You'd generally get to somewhere else--if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing."

"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

These lines from Through the Looking Glass describe the world in Vile Bodies, a world in which, despite frenzied action, nobody seems to get anywhere. The characters try to alleviate their boredom and anxieties by maintaining an ever-increasing pace in living, constantly seeking new diversions, new variations of parties, games and trips.

Waugh sees this endless round of activity as the dance of the vile bodies and expresses his vision of a world going out of control through the image of Agatha Runcible's car going out of control. The race itself, in which the cars going round and round at a furious pace are ruthlessly eliminated, is an image of the furious tempo of modern existence which few can stand. When Agatha's car goes completely out of control and crashes into a market cross--ironically a symbol of outdated values from a slower age--we are given a nightmare vision of a world gone mad in Agatha's dreams. This vision of insanity is the logical outcome of the confusion of images and ideas which contemporary man is subject to and the fast tempo of his life:

I thought we were all driving round and round in a motor race and none of us could stop, and there was an enormous audience composed entirely of gossip writers and gate crashers and Archie Schwert and people like that, all shouting at us at once to go faster, and car after car kept crashing until I was left all alone driving and driving--and then I used to crash and wake up.²

She had come in a motor-car, she explained, which would not stop. It was full of bugs which she had tried to kill with drops of face lotion. One of them threw a spanner. There had been a stone thing in the way.³

Waugh subtly associates the film technique which he uses to express his theme of a world gone out of control in Vile Bodies with Agatha's nightmare vision, the central image of this theme:

There was rarely more than a quarter of a mile of the black road to be seen at one time. It unrolled like a

length of cinema film. At the edges was confusion;--a fog spinning past: "Faster, faster," they shouted above the roar of the engine. The road rose suddenly and the white car soared up the sharp ascent without slackening speed. At the summit of the hill there was a corner. Two cars had crept up, one on each side, and were closing in.⁴

Both the film technique described earlier and Agatha's hallucinations are expressions of the theme introduced in the epigraph of the novel.

In Chapter One the heaving ship which leaves the passengers confused and sick is a microcosm of the world presented in Vile Bodies. Most of the characters in the novel seem to be on board and the unstable, "sick-making" environment is the physical equivalent of the spiritual environment of the novel. The decline in religion and the search for desperate remedies which characterizes the spiritual environment is parodied by Waugh's comment on the passengers' absurd remedies for sea-sickness: "to avert the terrors of sea-sickness they had indulged in every kind of civilized witchcraft, but they were lacking in faith."⁵ Even Mrs. Ape's bogus religion is temporarily grasped at as a remedy--for both physical and spiritual sea-sickness. The war which erupts at the end of Vile Bodies is thus the logical expression of the spiritual chaos which went before and presents a symbolical vision of the modern wasteland.

This use of the image of a heaving ship to represent the turmoil of life recurs briefly in A Handful of Dust

when the animals in cages on Tony's ship who are pitched violently to and fro remind us of man's similar helplessness. Throughout the novel the central image by which Waugh expresses man's helplessness in a world governed solely by chance is the card game. Before and after John's death Mrs. Rattery sits relentlessly playing patience:

(Mrs. Rattery sat intent over the game, moving little groups of cards adroitly backwards and forwards about the table like shuttles across a loom; under her fingers order grew out of chaos; she established sequence and precedence; the symbols before her became coherent, interrelated.)

.....
Mrs. Rattery brooded over her chequer of cards and then drew them towards her into a heap, haphazard once more and without meaning; it had nearly come to a solution that time, but for a six of diamonds out of place, and a stubbornly congested patch at one corner, where nothing could be made to move. "It's a heart-breaking game," she said.⁵

This game of chance in which Mrs. Rattery attempts to establish sequence and precedence, but which ends in frustration, expresses the futility of trying to establish reason and order where there can be none. Immediately after John's death Tony is also drawn into this absurd pastime and sits playing Animal Snap, another game of chance, much to the horror of the servants. The game forshadows Tony's life in the jungle, surrounded by animals, and its monotonous repetition and pointlessness echoes the absurdity of his ultimate fate.

The circle appears quite frequently as an image and pattern representing modern life. In Decline and Fall

Silenus' wheel symbolizes the frenzied but purposeless activity of contemporary man. Silenus compares life to the big wheel at Luna (lunatic?) Park. As the wheel revolves rapidly people try to sit in it but keep getting flung off. Some, like Margot and her friends "hold on for dear life and enjoy that." Others "think they've got to join in the game, even if they don't enjoy it."⁷ The point which Silenus makes is that if you don't want to you don't have to get on the wheel. Several characters, including Paul, Tony and William avoid the madness of the modern world by escaping to more quiet lives in the country or university. Nevertheless, Waugh is conscious of the inadequacies of such an escape and explores them in A Handful of Dust.

In Vile Bodies the circle appears as a pattern epitomizing the lives of the characters, who go round and round in the social vortex, getting nowhere. The endlessly repeated parties, the persistent reappearance and disappearance of the drunken major who has money which is to be Adam's salvation, the on-again-off-again engagement of Nina and Adam; all these are culminated in the vicious and purposeless car race which is the central symbol of the novel. The final line of Vile Bodies is, "And presently, like a circling typhoon, the sounds of battle began to return."⁸ Waugh concludes the book on a note which suggests the endlessness of the turmoil, violence and destruction

characterizing the world of the vile bodies.

Tony in A Handful of Dust is also associated with the circular pattern. The scene in which he and Jock get drunk and keep phoning Brenda is like a vaudeville routine in which the characters get involved in some endless, repetitive action, getting nowhere. This scene in the novel suggests the purposelessness of Tony's life. That part of the novel which describes Tony's search for the lost city is introduced by the description of a man walking round and round the deck of a ship. The man thinks Tony is "potty" when he says that he is looking for a city, but both Tony's search and the man's circling are equally "potty" and lead nowhere. Later, Tony wanders in circles through the jungles of South America, still searching for the lost city in his delirium. The circular pattern thus becomes representative of the uselessness of Tony's search for meaning and value in life; he is left with a "handful of dust," caught up in the endless cycle of reading Dickens' works.

The circle is also a common structural pattern in the novels. In Decline and Fall, after undergoing many unusual and painful experiences, Paul finds himself in exactly the same situation he was in at the beginning. Waugh emphasizes this fact by using almost identical words in the Prelude and Epilogue to describe Paul's situation: "It was his second year of uneventful residence at Scone,"⁹

becomes "It was Paul's third year of uneventful residence at Scone."¹⁰ Despite the time and energy which have been expended he has not progressed at all. Nor, it seems, has the situation of the world. At the beginning of the book "There had been a most interesting paper about plebiscites in Poland,"¹¹ and at the end a friend comments, "That was an interesting paper to-night about the Polish plebiscites."¹² The structure of A Handful of Dust is also circular, inasmuch as things revert to what they had been without Tony. Brenda marries Jock Grant-Menzies as she had initially been expected to, Mrs. Beaver is still redecorating old houses and the Social Set continues as it always has. In Scoop William returns to never-changing Boot Magna Hall and resumes his life as if he had never been away, editing "Lush Places" in the style inherited from the Rector of Boot Magna. The previously mentioned last sentence of the book, "Outside the owls hunted maternal rodents and their furry brood," emphasizes the unchangeability of nature's life cycle and the permanence of certain basic things despite man's vigorous attempts to change everything. Basil, like William and Paul, also returns after many adventures to find Sonia and Alastair still in their bedroom. In Azania, despite radical political changes, the British are still more concerned with their social lives than the politics of the country, Mr. Youkoumian is still making shady deals, and the lorry is

still in the middle of the road. By giving these novels a circular structure, Waugh is suggesting that no real progress and no solution to the modern dilemma is possible.

CHAPTER VIII

ABSURD MAN

When Camus refers to the feeling of the strangeness of the world which a man experiences he is also referring to the feeling of alienation from the other men who exist in that world. This sense of alienation from other human beings is an aspect of the absurd. Camus writes: "It is probably true that a man remains forever unknown to us and that there is in him something irreducible that escapes us. But practically I know men and recognize them by their behavior, by the totality of their deeds, by the consequences caused in life by their presence."¹ Camus' statement, which emphasizes the impossibility of knowing a man, except superficially, suggests that a writer whose premise is that the world is absurd is unlikely to present characters who are completely defined and whose motivation is firmly established.

In an interview with Julian Jebb Waugh explained that he prefers the objective method of characterization: "All fictional characters are flat. A writer can give the illusion of depth by giving an apparently stereoscopic view of a character--seeing him from two vantage points; all a writer can do is give more or less information about a

character, not information of a different order."² In the earlier novels Waugh reveals his character's personalities and their feelings and thoughts primarily through externalized action and dialogue. Only very rarely does he let us know what they are thinking, and these passages, for example the passage in Scoop where we learn of William's fears about an article he wrote and his horror of the city, reveal very little. The main characters receive more exposure and consequently a greater amount of information is provided, but they too are presented from the outside and the reader knows them only "by their behavior, by the totality of their deeds, by the consequences caused in life by their presence." A. E. Dyson's criticism that Waugh's novels do not explain why people are as they are is pointless: the author implies that it is impossible to know why. In his method of characterization Waugh does not assume that a man is an easily deciphered entity. Rather, he conveys the uncertainty and illogicality of the human personality. None of the characters are completely defined, not even Tony, who is the most complex character in the first five novels.

Waugh provides a limited amount of information about Paul, Adam and William, and because they are passive characters who rarely take any initiative their motivation is a mystery and their responses difficult to predict. Occasionally, they demonstrate characteristics we do not

expect them to possess which seem inconsistent with our information about them. In fact, Paul and Adam are not meant to be completely valid characters; their characterization is subordinated to the purpose of presenting a vision of the irrational world. We are surprised when Paul, a theology student, adapts to the corrupt world he is introduced into and accepts what he understands of Margot's way of life, but when he reverts to his old way of life at Oxford without having been corrupted or otherwise affected by his experiences, we realize that probability has been stretched. Adam, on the other hand, is an incongruous combination of victim and victimizer, who one moment seems unable to cope with the exploitation that surrounds him and the next moment is selling Nina to Ginger and cuckolding him. We know a bit more about Basil, partly because other characters comment on him, but he too is enigmatic. He becomes quite a different person when he is in Azania, changing from a profligate who leads an aimless, lazy way of life to a hard working public servant. No motivation is established and we are never quite sure whether he is idealistically working to improve conditions in Azania, unaware of the confusion that is resulting, or whether he is devoted to creating this anarchy. Tony, in A Handful of Dust is the one main character who is presented in depth, although the method of characterization is still objective. The reason for the more thorough characterization

is that this novel, unlike the others, presents a personal experience of the absurd rather than a general vision of the absurdity of modern existence.

The impossibility of really knowing other human beings and a sense of isolation from them is part of the experience of the characters in the novels. Poor Tony eventually learns how very wrong he is when he says, "But, you see, I know Brenda so well."³ The actions and characteristics attributed to Paul by the people around him have nothing to do with his behavior and personality as they really are. A quiet, well-behaved theology student at Scone, who is accidentally involved in the antics of the Bollinger Club and stripped of his trousers, he is expelled from the College and treated as a reprobate by everyone around him. Adam is constantly being mistaken for someone else by Nina's father. This question of identity and the themes of mistaken identity and disguise appear in all the novels. Through the motifs of disguise and mistaken identity Waugh expresses the indefiniteness of human personality. At the end of Decline and Fall Paul assumes a new identity, pretending to be his own cousin, grows a heavy cavalry moustache as a disguise and resumes his life as a quiet student. The fact that the disguise is only effective when he needs it is further evidence of the indefinite nature of this character. Philbrick's identity is never established and he presents a different

version of it to everyone he meets. He tells Mr. Prendergast that he is really a Portuguese Count, Grimes that he is a novelist and Paul that he is a retired burglar. Several times in the novel he reappears from nowhere; once as a prisoner, another time as Sir Solomon Philbrick who wishes to buy Llanabba Castle, and finally, riding in a Rolls Royce which nearly runs Paul over. All that we eventually learn about him is that he is an impersonator. The appearance of the same character in different roles, besides being a comic and satiric device, expresses what Camus says about the difficulty of really knowing a man.

"A man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses,"⁴ Camus writes. In Decline and Fall and Vile Bodies nothing seems to exist but the sham or make-believe worlds created by the characters. This is certainly true of Philbrick, who exists only as a collection of roles which he believes in himself. As an impersonator, moreover, Philbrick is no more dishonest than Margot, whose social status and riches come from her brothel business, Dr. Fagan, who pretends to be a Ph.D., M.D. or whatever else is required in his various enterprises, Paul's guardian who appropriates Paul's inheritance under false pretenses, or any of the other hypocrites and impostors who inhabit the sham world which Waugh exposes in Decline and Fall. When Paul first starts teaching at

Llanabba Castle he can't find out the boys names because the class divides itself into two parties: "those who were Tangent and those who were not."⁵ On one level this is delightful nonsense, on another it again raises the question of identity; by knowing the boys' names Paul won't really know the boys anyhow. In Vile Bodies the ease with which Adam impersonates Ginger accentuates the vagueness of his personality. And in Scoop the multiple cases of mistaken identity reflect the madness of a world in which individuals are only names; by the end of the novel any Boot will do.

As many of the main characters in modern novels tend to be, Paul, William, Adam, Tony and Basil are anti-heroes. Waugh's use of the anti-hero is indicative of the state of man in the twentieth century. Sean O'Faolain, in defining the anti-hero writes: "Whatever he is, weak or brave, brainy or bewildered, his one abiding characteristic is that, like his author-creator, he is never able to see any Pattern in life and rarely its Destination."⁶ Waugh's anti-heroes come in two forms. There are those who, bewildered by the chaos around them, are not in charge of their own destinies, but are manipulated and propelled by the anarchic forces around them. Caught up in the irrational activity about them, they assert no positive stance towards life and take no initiative. Paul, for example, is decent and innocent, but he has no

strongly held values and his apparent values and beliefs are easily brushed aside once he comes face to face with the world outside his protected university environment. The other kind of anti-hero, represented by Basil Seal, is neither a passive hero nor the victim of the confusion; he is too anarchistic and amoral to be a hero. He is involved in vigorous, wholly meaningless action but he too reflects the lack of purpose and values, the inability to sense any pattern in life which characterizes modern man. Basil and his friends question all established values and assert the disorder and amorality of man's existence. Paul, Tony, and, to a certain extent, Adam, are victims. Basil and his kind are active perpetrators of anarchy. When we first meet him, Basil has seemingly come from nowhere, for he wakes up in a totally strange place among strangers and doesn't remember how he got there. He disregards all the accepted social conventions, turning up uninvited, barging into conversations with unwilling victims, conversing in foreign dialects with people who don't understand and looking like a ruffian. Even in Azania Basil works energetically on plans which are of a destructive nature and allies himself with a scoundrel like Youkoumian. In the irrational world of the twentieth century, however, it is only an anarchistic and amoral character like Basil who can cope. Basil is perfectly at home in the savage society of Africa; he knows that only

the ruthless survive. When Seth is killed he coolly lets the Azanians know that the murderer is to be executed on the spot.

Captain Grimes is another character who adapts to any situation. He succeeds where others like Mr. Prendergast perish, because he is, according to himself, "in harmony with the primitive promptings of humanity."⁷ Like the "tree among trees" and the "cat among animals" which Camus describes, he is in harmony with the world because he does not question it, he does not have "Doubts." He is a part of the world rather than apart from it and his "primitive promptings," in which a sense of propriety or morality have no role, enable him to survive despite severe set-backs. Mr. Youkoumian, in Black Mischief, is also a character who knows how to survive. Despite his cruelty and selfishness we cannot but admire his instinct for self-preservation. Waugh seems to suggest that the only people who can survive in this mad world without escaping from it as Tony, Paul and William do, are those whose "primitive promptings" match the world's savagery.

CHAPTER IX

MAN AS MACHINE

"Men, too secrete the inhuman."

Taken to its furthest extreme, the situation of modern man in his disrelation from his environment makes him seem and behave like a sub-human or mechanical creature. Camus writes:

Men, too secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show; you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this "nausea," as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.¹

Waugh presents the image of man as machine as an aspect of the absurdity of modern life. He emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of modern technology and satirizes those who, forgetful of their humanity, lead lives without an inner purpose. To express the dehumanizing, manipulative effect of society on Paul, Waugh compares him to a puppet: "as he tied his tie he trembled from head to foot like one of the wire toys which street vendors dangle from trays."² Professor Silenus is the epitome of the modern "mechanical" man. A description of Silenus eating first suggests his

nature: "the hand which had held the biscuit still rose and fell to and from his mouth with a regular motion, while his empty jaws champed rhythmically; otherwise he was wholly immobile."³ He has "large glasses, behind which his eyes lay like slim fish in an aquarium; they woke from their slumber, flashed iridescent in the light, and darted towards little Beste-Chetwynde."⁴ The eyes which lie "like slim fish in an aquarium" and their machine-like flashing iridescence suggest the man's dehumanization. Neither Silenus nor Margot is able to sleep naturally; Margot takes veronal, the Professor is unable to sleep. Paul's conception of the man completes our impression of him as a totally mechanical being:

he thought of the young man a few bedrooms away, lying motionless in the darkness, his hands at his sides, his legs stretched out, his eyes closed, and his brain turning and turning all the night through, drawing in more and more power, storing it away like honey in its intricate cells and galleries, till the atmosphere about it became exhausted and vitiated and only the brain remained turning in the darkness.⁵

The attempts of modern society to remake man, ignoring his basic nature and forcing him to adapt to his artificial technological environment instead of vice versa are satirized in the theories which Silenus expounds. "Why can't the creature stay in one place? Up and down, in and out, round and round! Why can't they sit still and work? Do dynamos require staircases? Do monkeys require houses? What an immature, self-destructive, antiquated mischief

is man!"⁶ At the same time Silenus pinpoints the nature of man's alienation from his world: "this erratic, maladjusted mechanism of his soul: on one side the harmonious instincts and balanced responses of the animal, on the other the inflexible purpose of the engine, and between them man. . . ." ⁷ Silenus chooses to overcome the difficulty by taking man's alienation to its logical extreme and becoming a machine.

Other characters in the novels who seek forgetfulness or anesthesia in constant, fast and purposeless action, in distractions such as games and parties, also remind us of machines. When Bergson defines the comic as "Something mechanical encrusted on the living,"⁸ he explains that by "mechanical" he means any substitution of the artificial for the natural, and this includes social masquerades, abnormal behavior and deformity, in short, any behavior which denies man's humanity. The complete impersonality of human relations which is described in the Trumpingtons' bedroom, where strangers whose names they don't bother to find out sleep, eat and borrow money from Sonia, is thus "mechanical" because it distorts normal human behavior. It is not surprising that in such a world insanity can be made to appear almost normal. Under the shock of John's death Tony withdraws into the anesthetizing and mechanical action of playing Animal Snap. Agatha, whose mind has snapped, continues to function in a

parody of normal social behavior: "smiling deliriously, and bowing her bandaged head to imaginary visitors.

'Darling,' she said, 'How too . . . devine . . . how are you? . . . and how are you? . . . how angelic of you all to come . . .'"⁹ Though Black Mischief was published

before the invention of the computer, Seth's ever-increasing production of lists of impossible ideas which are to be implemented at once reminds us of a computer gone out of control.

In Scoop the dehumanizing influence of modern city life is conveyed through the description of the world of the daily newspaper:

Six lifts seemed to be in perpetual motion; with dazzling frequency their doors flew open to reveal now left, now right, now two or three at a time, like driven game, a series of girls in Caucasian uniform. "Going up," they cried in Punch and Judy accents and, before anyone could enter, snapped their doors and disappeared from view. A hundred or so men and women of all ranks and ages passed before William's eyes. The sole stationary objects were a chryselephantine effigy of Lord Copper . . . and a concierge, also more than life size, who sat in a plate-glass enclosure, like a fish in an aquarium, and gazed at the agitated multitude with fishy, supercilious eyes.¹⁰

It is a picture of a huge mechanism of which even the people are a part. The puppet-like elevator girls behave like machines, always calling out the same thing like a pre-recorded message and snapping their doors shut whether anyone is heading their way or not as if they were unconscious of their environment and compelled by a pre-set mechanism. The concierge sitting behind the glass seems

inhuman too, stationary like the effigy of Lord Copper and artificially separated from other human beings by plate-glass, like a fish in the artificial environment of an aquarium or a specimen in a museum. Later this picture of life in the Megapolitan Building is elaborated:

"ground-glass doors opened and shut; figures in frayed and perished braces popped in and out; on a hundred lines reporters talked at cross purposes; . . . At the hub and still centre of all this animation, Lord Copper sat alone in splendid tranquility."¹¹ The vast Megapolitan organization is compared to a huge wheel or system of wheels, just as modern life is compared to a wheel in Decline and Fall. Everything and everyone in this newspaper world is involved in vigorous mechanical activity. The popping in and out of the workers is undifferentiated from the opening and closing of doors. Modern city life is thus seen as utterly dehumanizing.

CHAPTER X

THE PROBLEM OF VALUES IN MODERN LIFE

Evelyn Waugh is, as every critic inevitably points out, a Catholic writer. All his novels except Decline and Fall were written after his conversion to Catholicism, which took place on September 29, 1930. Yet, whatever his personal system of values may have been at the time, Mr. Waugh's first five novels provide no explicit revelation as to its nature and there is no indication that his point of view is that of a Catholic.

As a schoolboy Waugh became an atheist. He states in his autobiography, A Little Learning: "On 18th June, 1921 I wrote in my diary: 'In the last few weeks I have ceased to be a Christian. I have realized that for the last two terms at least I have been an atheist in all except the courage to admit it myself.'"¹ He records that, according to the diary which he kept at the time, this period of his life was, "full of pagan gloom and the consideration of suicide."² In 1925 the author made an unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide. Five years later, after a disastrous marriage which lasted a year and which seems to have been the last straw,³ Waugh turned from this atheism to Catholicism, a doctrine which could give meaning

to his life and make it bearable. After his conversion he wrote: "Those who have read my works will perhaps understand the character of the world into which I exuberantly launched myself. Ten years of that world sufficed to show me that life there, or anywhere, was unintelligible and unendurable without God."⁴ James Carens in The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh describes the conversion as a "leap of faith" and "total, irrational commitment."⁵ It is tempting to see the conversion as the "leap" in the face of absurdity to restore the comfort of the eternal which Camus describes in The Myth of Sisyphus.⁶ Such a "leap" provides man with meaning, although Camus terms it "philosophical suicide" because it eludes the struggle. Camus names religion and the belief in God as one way of "leaping," and it seems to have been Waugh's way of escaping an "unintelligible and unendurable" world.

Until Brideshead Revisited, in which Waugh loses much of his detachment, his Catholic point of view is hardly apparent in his novels. Roman Catholicism seems to have provided him with a private system of values which gave his life meaning, but he does not attempt to present it as a standard or solution. It is in Brideshead Revisited that Waugh first postulates his religion as a system of values and an alternative to the chaos of contemporary life. A religious system of values obviously only has a partisan appeal in the contemporary world and Waugh shows this in

Brideshead Revisited, at no point advocating it as a universal solution. Of course, Catholicism, like any other religion, has its limits as a satirical norm because it relates only to the spiritual aspects of life. Waugh presents it as one of the "little independent systems of order" which he describes as "The artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today."⁷ The contemporary world remained "disintegrated" and life was still meaningless for many men despite Waugh's own conversion. It is not, therefore, very surprising that Waugh continued writing about the modern experience of meaninglessness and absurdity even though he had found a personal solution.

In several of the novels Waugh even depicts the inadequacies of religion in modern life. The religious beliefs of Paul Pennyfeather and Mr. Prendergast are satirized in Decline and Fall. Paul's beliefs, although he is a theology student, are shown to have no practical value or meaning in the world outside Scone College; we wonder if they ever existed. At the end of the book we discover that his religious beliefs have been undisturbed by Paul's experiences and he is able to revert to them as easily as he reverts to wearing his scholar's gown when he returns to Oxford, piously condemning the heresies of the Bishop of Bithnia and the Ebionites. Mr. Prendergast, the ex-Anglican minister, with his "Doubts" is a comic and pathetic figure whose sense of honor and concern with

his loss of faith are satirically combined with his great regrets for the loss of material comfort which went with it. An incongruous figure in a world where religion is of little interest to anyone, Mr. Prendergast does not suffer because of an inability to believe in God, but because he cannot "understand why God had made the world at all."⁸

The parsimonious Mrs. Melrose Ape and her troupe of not-so-holy "Angels" are used to satirize phony and lucrative religiousness in Vile Bodies, and the hypocrisy of religion is satirized in the enigmatic Father Rothschild, with his false beard and numerous intrigues. The priest in Black Mischief who beats up a native for stealing his breakfast is an example of a lack of Christian charity among the clergy. In A Handful of Dust religion is portrayed as irrelevant to contemporary life. This divorce of religion from the reality of life is succinctly and comically satirized by means of the minister's sermons, which are unaltered since they were first composed in India. Its irrelevance is more seriously expressed by Tony's experience. When his son is killed religion brings him no consolation and has no meaning for him: ". . . after all the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion."⁹ In these and numerous other instances Waugh's satire is frequently aimed at people for whom religion is a convenience, providing material benefits or

an escape from the struggles of modern life, but at the same time, there is the underlying suggestion that religion is somewhat irrelevant in modern life, except as an escape.

If Waugh's Catholicism is not apparent in his early novels, there is no other discernible system of values which acts as the standard for his satire. Charles Glicksberg in The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature says that the reason for the difficulty in establishing systems of values in modern literature lies in the co-existence of so many contradictory and irreconcilable attitudes and beliefs. He writes: "It is not that the categories of meaning and the operative table of values are so confounded that no standards of judgment remain, but they cannot today be affirmed with the old certitude. The categories are seen to be ambiguous, equivocal, and paradoxical. Everything is bathed in the chiaroscuro of relativism and uncertainty."¹⁰ Waugh has expressed the same awareness of the absence of homogeneous moral standards and the problems this presents in an article written in Life after the publication of Brideshead Revisited:

Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards--the earlier Roman Empire and Eighteenth Century Europe. It is against inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue. The artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today, is to create little independent systems

of order of his own. I foresee in the dark age opening that the scribes may play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories. They were not satirists.¹¹

Waugh's statement that his novels are not satirical can be understood as an indictment of the "Century of the Common Man" in which "vice no longer pays lip service to virtue," rather than as a real attempt to determine whether in fact the novels are satirical. He is ironically suggesting that the vision of the century which he presents in his novels is not an exaggeration; it is merely a record of what he, as a "scribe," sees. In a way, Waugh is right of course; it is no longer possible to write satires like those written by the Romans or eighteenth-century writers, in which widely sanctioned moral standards underlie the satirical attacks and the motivating factors are ostensibly moral indignation and the urge to reform. But Waugh's writing is satirical if we recognize that essentially satire is a mediator between the desire for moral order and reason and the cruelty and irrationality of the world. The difference between a modern satirist such as Waugh and an eighteenth-century writer such as Swift is that in modern satire all that is left is a desire for moral order and reason rather than the belief that they are possible. Because the eighteenth-century satirist and the society he lived in believed in the existence of ideal standards, he asserted a vision of what man and society ought to be. The modern satirist,

on the other hand, writes in an age which does not believe in the existence of ideal systems of value and meaning. His reason and desire for order is the only standard or point of view applied to the irrational universe. What Waugh means when he compares himself to the scribes of the dark ages thus becomes apparent: in applying the standards of reason and order to the perception of the world around, the satirist is merely acting as a scribe. Wyndham Lewis expresses it very well in Men Without Art:

Indeed, often it is nothing but people's vanity that causes them to use that term [satire] at all: often they are, in what they call "satire" confronted with a description of their everyday life as close to the truth as that found in any other artistic formula. It is merely a formula based rather upon the "truth" of the intellect than upon the "truth" of the average romantic sensualism.¹²

The interesting point is that modern satire, and specifically Waugh's satire, in which the intellect of the satirist confronts the irrationality of the universe, is obviously akin to Camus' definition of the absurd.

If the point of view from which the early satires are written is Waugh's sense of what is rational, its specific expression is found in the author's ironic tone. In Brideshead Revisited and the novels which come after Waugh tries to "create little independent systems of order of his own," based on his Catholicism, which act as standards of judgment and are like the ideal vision of the eighteenth-century satirist. In the early novels where no standard of values is apparent, the means of

recognizing the author's evaluation of characters, actions and situations is provided by irony. As the touchstone of his meaning in the various attacks which he makes, irony enables Waugh to write satire in the modern age despite the absence of homogeneous moral standards. It is not that Waugh lacks a standard, but rather that it is a personal standard and therefore has little hope of being recognized or approved by his readers. Instead of offering an implied alternative to the disintegrating world he is attacking, Waugh conveys his attitude through irony without making his personal system of values completely obvious. His critical attitude towards specific characters, institutions, behavior and ideas is primarily indicated by his irony in describing them, but it is difficult to identify the system of values which underlies his attacks because there is no discernible pattern. While indicating disapproval of the corruption and aimless existence of Margot and her coterie, Waugh's tone also implies an admiration for their gusto, daring and ability to get on in the modern world. He is actually more ironical towards virtuous characters like Miss Mouse and Mr. Prendergast. Similarly, despite his immoral behavior, Basil Seal has the author's sympathy, and even his most outrageous actions are so understated that they seem naughty and delightful pranks. In Black Mischief and Scoop, Waugh's attitude towards the effects of Western civilization and

exploitation on primitive cultures is clearly negative and yet he does not completely identify with the savage natives. Even Waugh's evaluation of Tony Last is ambiguous. He is sympathetic towards Tony's humanism and decency, but retains a sense of irony in describing his eccentricities and refusal to accept reality. At the same time he disapproves of Brenda's behavior. Nevertheless, in the end it is Tony who suffers an ironically appropriate fate while Brenda, after a short period of misery, remarries happily. By presenting no pattern of value or meaning in the novels, and by avoiding any hint of the existence of positive alternatives to the attitudes, behavior and beliefs of his characters, Waugh conveys the sense of a world in which no pattern or meaning is possible.

The essence of his irony is his detachment, his cool impersonal manner which contrasts with his subject-matter, with the cruelty, arbitrariness, incongruity and irrationality which he describes. The degree of his detachment combined with the nature of the facts which are presented, give an indication of his point of view. Thus, Dame Mildred Porch's letter to her husband from Azania speaks for itself: "Fed doggies in market-place. Children tried to take food from doggies. Greedy little wretches."¹³ On the other hand, the casual manner of the reference to Basil's theft of his mother's emerald bracelet evokes our laughter not disapprobation. Of

course, in both cases, previously introduced details have encouraged attitudes towards Mildred and Basil which affect our responses to these incidents. To say that Waugh's style is detached is not to suggest that his underlying attitude is detached: the facts and incongruities may speak for themselves, but he has selected the facts and the manner in which they are revealed. Inevitably, his sympathies and dislikes are the basis for this selection, but they never appear as a coherent system of values and beliefs.

At times Waugh does reveal an obvious sympathy with certain values. Numerous critics point to the interlude in Vile Bodies which describes Anchorage House, as a touchstone of the attitude which indicates Waugh's satirical perspective. In this interlude Waugh describes the visitors to Anchorage House:

pious and honourable people (many of whom made the Anchorage House reception the one outing of the year), their women-folk well gowned in rich and durable stuffs, their men-folk ablaze with orders; people who had represented their country in foreign places and sent their sons to die for her in battle, people of decent and temperate life, uncultured, unaffected, unembarrassed, unassuming, unambitious people, of independent judgment and marked eccentricities, kind people who cared for animals and the deserving poor, brave and rather unreasonable people. . . .¹⁴

The key phrase in this passage, "people who cared for animals and the deserving poor," as well as the words "uncultured" and "unreasonable," betray the author's ironical attitude towards these people. Far from being

the eulogy it appears, the passage is an ironic indictment of upper-middle class self-satisfaction. Together with these "pious and honourable people" appears an assortment of semi-respectable characters such as Lady Metroland, Lord Outrage, Lady Throbbing and Mrs. Blackwater. It is hard to see how the values represented by the people gathered at Anchorage House can be postulated as Waugh's norm.

On the other hand, the description of the house itself, with its "grace and dignity and otherworldliness," indicates a nostalgia for the order and beauty of the past, a nostalgia which recurs in Waugh's novels and is already hinted at in Decline and Fall. As Paul is driving up to Margot's he has a glimpse of the glory of the past:

Surely, he thought, these great chestnuts in the morning sun stood for something enduring and serene in a world that had lost its reason and would so stand when the chaos and confusion were forgotten? And surely it was the spirit of William Morris that whispered to him in Margot Beste-Chetwynde's motor car about seed-time and harvest, the superb succession of the seasons, the harmonious interdependence of rich and poor, of dignity, innocence, and tradition?¹⁵

But this dream is shattered by the appearance of Margot's rebuilt aluminum, concrete and glass house, King's Thursday, and although we suspect that Paul's dream is close to Waugh's own in this passage, in view of what follows it also becomes ironic. King's Thursday, its beauty and harmony destroyed completely by modernization, epitomizes the replacement of old values by the

disintegration and dehumanization of the new age. Waugh seems to cherish the values of the past and critics have suggested this conservatism as the norm of his satire. But the hint of nostalgia for the past which appears in the satires can hardly be considered a standard of values. Moreover, the great houses of the past in the novels are representative of an escape from the reality of the present rather than symbols of values which have any relevance now. Hetton Abbey in A Handful of Dust becomes a symbol of Tony's outdated, irrelevant attitudes and beliefs, which prove to be useless when confronted with the facts of modern life. Tony discovers that his liberal humanism, inherited from the past, is inadequate when he is confronted with his son's death and the desertion of his wife. His dreams of the past glory of Hetton are an escape from the complexities and absurdities of his age. Boot Magna Hall in Scoop is both literally and symbolically William Boot's escape from the madness which surrounds him, inasmuch as it too represents an outdated mode of living which provides an escape but not a solution to the modern dilemma. Unlike his attitude in A Handful of Dust, Waugh seems to approve of this escape as one of the few ways of coping with the madness. The only suggestion of positive meaning or value in the earlier satires is thus associated with the past, which can serve as an escape from the modern waste land but cannot really come to terms with it. An outdated

system of values and meaning cannot serve as a unifying principle which would give meaning and order to life; it is one of the many contradictory systems which coexist in the modern world and contribute to the confusion and absurdity.

CONCLUSION

Waugh's first five novels are satires which show things as they are, not things as they ought to be. In the past, satirists presented the absurdity of particular things and indicated alternative behavior. In Waugh's satires, the incidents, characters and environment as well as the techniques used to present them, combine to convey a vision of the absurdity of the human condition in the twentieth century; reason and order seem impossible and there is no proposed solution. At the same time, Waugh criticizes a society in which people live petty, inauthentic lives, unaware of any ultimate reality. By confronting the reader with a slightly exaggerated picture of modern life, Waugh startles him into awareness. By making him laugh at the human condition Waugh enables him to accept it. Eugene Ionesco, the absurdist playwright, has also taken a comic approach in dealing with the absurd:

Humour is the only possibility we possess of detaching ourselves--yet only after we have surmounted, assimilated, taken cognizance of it--from our tragicomic human condition, the malaise of being. To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying.¹

Humour enables us to recognize the true nature of things, the absurdity of the human condition, and at the same time, accept it.

The absurd is thus at the heart of Waugh's comedies. The very characteristics which have lead critics to charge that Waugh is an entertainer who lacks a serious moral purpose, are an essential feature of his vision of the absurd. The comic, light-hearted tone of the novels arises from the detachment with which even the most horrifying events are described, a detachment which conveys the indifference surrounding modern man; the petty lives which many of Waugh's characters lead emphasize the meaninglessness and irrationality which underlies their existence; the incongruities which are a source of laughter are also indicative of a deeper absurdity; and, finally, the novels do not so much lack a moral viewpoint as convey the impossibility of finding one in the twentieth century.

NOTES

Introduction

¹Marcus, "Evelyn Waugh and the Art of Entertainment," 348-349. Marcus is not the only one to label Waugh an entertainer. Frederick R. Karl, among others, makes the same accusation.

²Griffiths, "Waugh's Problem Comedies," 165-170.

³Dyson, "Evelyn Waugh and the Mysteriously Disappearing Hero," 72-79.

⁴Kleine, "The Cosmic Comedies of Evelyn Waugh," 537.

⁵Although Put Out More Flags contains some elements of the absurd, it does not present the underlying vision of an absurd world which characterizes the first five novels. A "new spirit," a sense of purpose has been introduced by the war.

⁶Waugh, "Felix Culpa," 322.

Chapter I

¹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 5.

²Ibid., 16.

³Ibid., 38.

⁴Ibid., 22.

⁵Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, 363.

Chapter II

¹Bradbury, Evelyn Waugh, 43.

²Waugh, A Handful of Dust, 114.

³Ibid., 116.

⁴Ibid., 119.

⁵Ibid., 116.

⁶Ibid., 119.

⁷Ibid., 121.

⁸Waugh appropriately compares this experience to an incident from the life of King Arthur. See page 240.

⁹Doyle, "Evelyn Waugh," 20.

Chapter III

¹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 11.

²Ibid., 11.

³Carens, The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh, 9-10.

⁴Waugh, Decline and Fall, 85.

⁵Ibid., 113.

⁶Ibid., 125.

⁷Ibid., 176.

⁸Waugh, Vile Bodies, 62.

⁹Waugh, Black Mischief, 183.

¹⁰Ibid., 232.

¹¹Ibid., 232.

¹²Decline and Fall, 215.

¹³Ibid., 216.

¹⁴Vile Bodies, 108.

¹⁵A Handful of Dust, 9.

¹⁶Ibid., 136. The ellipses are Waugh's.

¹⁷Ibid., 174.

¹⁸Ibid., 198.

¹⁹Decline and Fall, 45.

²⁰Black Mischief, 30.

²¹Ibid., 240.

²²Waugh, Scoop, 91.

²³Ibid., 254.

²⁴Ibid., 189-190.

²⁵They are, for example, described as having "slit, pig eyes."

²⁶Ibid., 212-213.

Chapter IV

¹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 22.

²Sontag, Against Interpretation, 276.

³Black Mischief, 15.

⁴Ibid., 149.

⁵Ibid., 173-174.

⁶The Myth of Sisyphus, 22.

⁷Black Mischief, 20.

⁸Ibid., 151.

⁹Ibid., 150.

¹⁰Ibid., 86.

¹¹A Handful of Dust, 158.

¹²Ibid., 184.

¹³Ibid., 238.

¹⁴Ibid., 216.

¹⁵Scoop, 91.

¹⁶Ibid., 36.

¹⁷Ibid., 241.

¹⁸Ibid., 241.

¹⁹Ibid., 238.

²⁰Vile Bodies, 196-197.

²¹Ibid., 197.

²²Ibid., 198.

²³Ibid., 77.

²⁴Ibid., 140-141.

²⁵Ibid., 207-208.

Chapter V

¹Waugh, "Ronald Firbank," 194.

²Ibid., 194.

³Ibid., 194.

⁴See Carens, The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh, 8-9.

⁵Vile Bodies, 158.

⁶Black Mischief, 85.

⁷Ibid., 202-203.

⁸See Davis, "Evelyn Waugh's Early Work: The Formation of a Method."

⁹Godard, quoted in Huss, The Film Experience, 116.

¹⁰Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, 289.

¹¹Scoop, 201.

¹²The Myth of Sisyphus, 11.

¹³Scoop, 168.

¹⁴Ibid., 168.

¹⁵Vile Bodies, 73.

¹⁶A Handful of Dust, 131.

¹⁷Scoop, 56.

¹⁸A Handful of Dust, 21.

Chapter VI

¹Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, 359.

²Vile Bodies, 112.

³Ibid., 64.

⁴Black Mischief, 129.

⁵A Handful of Dust, 165.

⁶Scoop, 79.

⁷Ibid., 80.

⁸Ibid., 63.

⁹Ibid., 62.

¹⁰Ibid., 30.

¹¹Vile Bodies, 41.

¹²Ibid., 42.

¹³Ibid., 149.

¹⁴Black Mischief, 88.

¹⁵Ibid., 56.

¹⁶A Handful of Dust, 69-70.

¹⁷Scoop, 37-38.

¹⁸Ibid., 15.

¹⁹Vile Bodies, 158.

²⁰Ibid., 174.

²¹Scoop, 81.

²²Vile Bodies, 35.

Chapter VII

- ¹Decline and Fall, 162.
- ²Vile Bodies, 186.
- ³Ibid., 180.
- ⁴Ibid., 197-198.
- ⁵Ibid., 13.
- ⁶A Handful of Dust, 127.
- ⁷Decline and Fall, 244.
- ⁸Vile Bodies, 221.
- ⁹Decline and Fall, 15.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 249.
- ¹¹Ibid., 16.
- ¹²Ibid., 249.

Chapter VIII

- ¹The Myth of Sisyphus, 9.
- ²Waugh, Paris Review, 110.
- ³A Handful of Dust, 126.
- ⁴The Myth of Sisyphus, 9.
- ⁵Decline and Fall, 49.
- ⁶O'Faolain, The Vanishing Hero, 17.
- ⁷Decline and Fall, 44.

Chapter IX

- ¹The Myth of Sisyphus, 11.
- ²Decline and Fall, 160.
- ³Ibid., 144.

- ⁴Ibid., 149.
- ⁵Ibid., 152.
- ⁶Ibid., 144.
- ⁷Ibid., 144.
- ⁸Bergson, Laughter, 37.
- ⁹Vile Bodies, 189.
- ¹⁰Scoop, 34-35.
- ¹¹Ibid., 207.

Chapter X

- ¹Waugh, A Little Learning, 141.
- ²Ibid., 143.
- ³Several critics, including Paul Doyle, see the disillusionment of this marriage as a basic factor in Waugh's conversion.
- ⁴Waugh, "Come Inside," 20.
- ⁵Carens, The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh, 96.
- ⁶The Myth of Sisyphus, 31.
- ⁷Waugh, "Fan-Fare," 60.
- ⁸Decline and Fall, 43.
- ⁹A Handful of Dust, 133.
- ¹⁰Glicksberg, The Tragic Vision, 151.
- ¹¹Waugh, "Fan-Fare," 60.
- ¹²Lewis, Men Without Art, 122.
- ¹³Black Mischief, 160.
- ¹⁴Vile Bodies, 126.
- ¹⁵Decline and Fall, 148.

Conclusion

¹Ionesco, "La démystification par l'humour noir,"
Paris: Avant-Scène, Feb. 15, 1959. Quoted in Esslin,
The Theatre of the Absurd, 158.

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